

MAGIC OF THE MOON

Beautiful, red-headed Jenni Wells, had been less than six months with The House of Donne when she was chosen as one of the two models to show their exclusive designs at the Venetian Fashion Month. Jenni was thrilled and not even the down-to-earth approach of the more sophisticated Sophia could dampen her spirits. And when the handsome, suave Count Mario Tolani, Chairman of the Committee, paid her marked attention, Jenni knew she would be a success.

Venice itself was enthralling; and if she took time off from all the sophistication to spend a quiet day at the Lido with Martin Heywood, who was studying new designs at the Murano glass-works, that too was bewitching. But the magic of the Venetian moon does not last for ever

By the same author

KISSES FOR THREE
SKYSCRAPER HOSPITAL
THE HEART ALONE
BECAUSE YOU'RE MINE
STAR OF DESIRE

MARSHA MANNING

MAGIC OF THE MOON



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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS FIVE o'clock and comparatively quiet again in the models' dressing-room. Most of the brilliant lights had been dimmed and the girls were relaxing after their strenuous afternoon spent showing the new collection in the warm perfumed salon downstairs. Anne was stretched out flat on the carpet, her bare feet raised against the wall to relieve the aching arches. The others lounged on their chairs in front of the huge mirrors. They were all drinking tea, hot and strong, and chattering noisily like a flock of lovely young birds.

There was Kay, the pert little redhead who showed débutante outfits, and the exotic Nani, half Chinese, with her sleek black hair and mysteriously slanted eyes. There was Sophia, blonde and tall and exquisitely graceful, always chosen to parade the grand ball-gowns which she did with her own brand of cool arrogance. There was the languorous Eleanor and there was also Jenni. She was usually selected for the tweed coats, the casual jersey suits and the flower-printed summer dresses evocative of an English garden or which The House of Donne was noted.

Jenni, who was Jennifer Wells, was nineteen. She had soft dark auburn hair and big hazel eyes and an air of natural freshness and simplicity. She was the newest addition to the team at Erik Donne's great house in the most exclusive Mayfair street. When she had first walked ner-

vously into his office, clutching the introduction card from the model agency which had trained her, he had taken one swift all-embracing look at the newcomer. Then he had announced dramatically :

"Young Grass! Yes . . . Pale green organza. No decoration. Just a touch of roleaux perhaps . . ."

Seizing the sketch-block always close at hand, he had commanded Jenni to stand perfectly still and created the dress on the spot. She had shown it in the salon ten days later, walking the pearl-grey carpets for the first time for the benefit of a wealthy South American client. That had been four months ago, and since then Jenni had been seasoned by taking part in two grand collection showings as well as posing for many glossy magazine photographs, and appearing at charity balls and other functions where Erik considered his creations should be admired.

Jenni was still considerably in awe of the bearded little genius who dressed Royalty and titled women and famous stars of show business, treating them all with the same egotistical imperiousness. Jenni was always surprised how meekly they submitted, too. Erik could be so devastating when he chose. If you trod on a flowing skirt as you came down the silver staircase into the salon or made some similar blunder, it immediately became a major crime.

"Clumsy little clown!" Erik would yell afterwards. "Don't tell me it was an accident either. Accidents are not permitted in this House. You must approach the wearing of my beautiful clothes in the proper spirit. Do you not realise what an honour it is? Then use your intelligence when you show them. If there is indeed any grey matter inside your head."

Jenni took it enormously seriously at first.

"Whatever can you say?" she had asked Sophia in the dressing-room, still quivering from the effects of the scene. The elder girl had laughed and said Erik wouldn't hear

the answer anyway, his quick mind already having leaped forward to something else.

"Don't worry, pet," Sophia added kindly. "You'll soon get used to it. Just remember it's only Erik's way. He's obviously satisfied with you or you'd have been fired at the end of your first week."

Beneath her sophisticated veneer, Sophia had a warm friendly temperament and she had helped Jenni tremendously during the first exacting weeks. There was so much to learn and remember, Jenni found. How to do the special make-up and comb your hair into six different styles to suit the various outfits. How to restrain your walk so there was no exaggerated movement between the neck and the knees. How to appear bright and radiant without even looking at the spectators. How to pose and keep your balance and smile and swing a coat to show the lining or flirt with a skirt-drapery. Even how to deal with the men who were for ever trying to ring you up for a date though you had never even met them. Nowadays Jenni felt a completely different creature from the girl who had stepped out of the train from Somerset at Paddington Station with thirty pounds in her bag and a determination to live her own life in future.

Anne was telling her colleagues about the much-married property millionaire who had tried to make her acquaintance in Paris as she sat sipping iced lemon-juice after a showing there.

"He kept telling me I must come and dine with him because his wife always bought her clothes at Erik Donne's! Such colossal nerve! I told him—Oh, no! No! Surely not again today. I'm absolutely dead as it is. I couldn't."

For the dressing-room door had opened and a rack was being wheeled in, which meant there were some more clothes the models were required to wear. Behind the rack came Daisy, who was the room-maid, a brisk little Cockney

woman with a tongue as sharp as her features when needs be.

"Keep your hair on, Miss Anne," she declared now. "'Tisn't nothing for you. Madame says Miss Sophia and Miss Jenni only. Will you please put on your cocktail numbers as quick as you can and go down to join Mr. Erik and herself in the sitting-room."

"A party!" Nani remarked. "There are clients staying behind for a drink tonight, yes?"

"That's right, dear." Daisy was taking down the dresses from the rack and handing them to Sophia and Jenni. "An Italian gentleman. Ever so good-looking, too. A real smasher. I wouldn't half like to see him on the telly—you'd better have your usual sandals with that, Miss Jenni—he sounds as if he's very important judging by the fuss they're making of him."

Jenni was diving into the honey-coloured organza with the faint design of wallflowers, deftly patting the skirt into place, reaching for the topaz-and-gold ornaments that had to go with it. As she turned round to the mirror to inspect her face, she heard Eleanor saying it must be the one who was planning the coming fashion month in Venice.

"He wants some of Erik's party numbers, I know. Says the American women there go wild about them. It sounds as if it's going to be quite a junket. Bit more eye-shadow, Jenni. Left lid. That's it. Got your bag, too?"

Sophia led the way in a dramatic green brocade suit and Jenni followed her down the stairs and across the salon to the exquisite little room in which Erik entertained his chosen guests. Madame was standing beside the door, blue-haired and stately. In any less exalted establishment she would have been called the manageress. Now she cast keenly critical eyes over the two girls as they came in and motioned them towards the blackwood table. Erik was bending over it, looking at some of his sketches.

With him was the handsomest man Jenni had ever seen. He was tall and lithe, wearing an immaculately-cut grey suit. His sun-tanned features might have come from a classic coin, regular and well-chiselled yet with a definite strength which revealed his essential virility. His hair was dark and so were his eyes. Brilliant and restless deep brown eyes that turned towards Sophia as she swept up to the table. They glowed with pleasure as they recognised her.

"But, of course!" the man exclaimed as he took Sophia's hand in his for a moment. "It was at Milan, was it not? Last spring. The Jersey Fair party."

"Yes, I was modelling for Valentina," Sophia said. "How clever of you to remember, Count Tolani."

So he had a title as well, Jenni thought. A man who had everything, obviously. She waited meekly until he had talked gaily with Sophia for a few minutes and then Madame formally introduced them.

"Count Mario Tolani—this is Miss Jenni."

He bowed over Jenni's hand then, smiling at her warmly.

"I am enchanted," he declared, "I was watching you with much admiration this afternoon. I know you will be a great success in Venice."

Then Erik called to him to look at a sketch he was holding out. Jenni glanced at Madame enquiringly.

"Venice!" she breathed. "Am I going there then?"

"You and Sophia," Madame told her in low tones. "Count Tolani particularly asked for you both. He is chairman of the committee which is organising the Venetian Fashion Month. Monsieur Erik will be sending a number of models for showing and naturally they cannot be worn by anybody except our own properly-trained girls."

"Of course not," Jenni answered dutifully.

Her heart began to sing excitedly. Venice! To go to Venice, the fabulous city of glamour and romance. Gondolas drifting along the shimmering canals in the amber

light. Ancient palaces and churches dreaming rose-pink in the scented dusk. She hardly heard Madame's murmured instructions not to accept more than one glass of the champagne Erik was starting to pour out. When Count Tolani raised his glass, he smiled towards the two girls and wished them a happy journey.

"You have been to Italy before, Miss Jenni?" he enquired.

"No. Never."

"Ah, then a wonderful experience awaits you," the Count declared. "You will fall in love with my beautiful country. We must try to arrange some sightseeing excursions for you. There should be opportunities because you will not require to be showing clothes all the time."

Jenni sighed blissfully that she would adore to see the Venetian scene. The stars in her eyes and the rose tinging her cheeks owed nothing to the golden wine she was drinking. In her mind's eye roses and music and art galleries and the pigeons of St. Mark's were jumbled together in one glorious vision. She started when Erik called her to his side and began to show her sketches of the models she was to wear during the month's parades.

Count Tolani bowed to both girls in turn when it was time for them to leave the room. Jenni walked back upstairs to the dressing-room still in her beautiful daze.

"Venice!" she echoed again to Sophia as they began to take off their clothes, "I can hardly believe it's true. I want to keep pinching myself."

"Wait until you get there—you'll be pinched all right!" Sophia remarked. "Tweaked and patted and treated to loud expressions of admiration every time you walk out. You've no idea what those Italian boys are like!"

"Yes, I've heard Anne talking about them," Jenni said, "when she was in Rome last autumn. I shan't take any notice, of course. That's the proper thing to do, isn't it?"

Sophia nodded as she reached for her own simple wool dress.

"It's not that they have evil intentions," she explained, "they just like women in a natural way. They'll sit for hours watching the girls walking past and commenting on them aloud. You'll get used to it."

"I hope I shall!"

"You see, in Italy men always like to make girls feel protected and desirable and everything nice. You'll never have to stand in a train or bus there while a man has a seat to give up. You'll be served first in shops and cafés, too. And when they cry: '*Bellissima!*' you'll feel like a goddess!"

Jenni considered this as she pulled on her dark green sweater and plain skirt.

"Yes. I suppose if a man like Count Tolani paid you compliments, you would be thrilled. Do you know him well, Sophia?"

"Goodness, no! He was at the Jersey Fair when I was working there for Valentina—that's all. Men of his type make a point of knowing all the models, anyway. He's one of the modern-style Italian aristocrats. Not content just to live in the family palazzo and talk about the glories of the past. He's put some of the money into the fashion business and he makes sure his investments pay handsome dividends. Which they most certainly do."

"A whole month in Venice," Jenni sighed. "There will be lots of showings and parades and things, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes," Sophia smiled. "You'll be expected to work hard, my dear. Although the actual showings take place in people's homes—you should just see the size of those great painted rooms! There'll be a grand evening at one of the art museums, and an afternoon or two along at the Lido with beachwear. Camera sessions, too, of course, and probably a TV film. We stay at one of the best hotels along with

the other models. They come from different countries to show their designers' clothes. It's a real Tower of Babel in the dressing-rooms!"

They switched off the lights and went out together, not through the salon and the silver staircase now but through a little door which led to the stone steps past the work-rooms. Tom, the commissionaire, nodded them a cheerful "Night-night, girls," and then Jenni parted with Sophia who had a bachelor flat in Chelsea. Jenni herself went in the opposite direction for she lived near Marble Arch. She was one of "my young lady guests" in the big old-fashioned house belonging to Miss MacFadden to whom Madame had recommended her when she first joined Erik Donne's establishment. The tart little Scotswoman gave her a tiny but comfortable bedroom with a generous breakfast and always seemed to be waiting in the office whenever Jenni needed advice or assistance. All callers of the male sex were received and inspected by Miss MacFadden before they were ushered into the hall. "And no young gentlemen in the young ladies' rooms either," was her implacable dictum. Not that Jenni minded. She was glad of the sense of security which living at Miss MacFadden's gave her.

Hatless, her hands in the pockets of her loose-swinging beige tweed coat, Jenni walked along towards Grosvenor Square. She was hardly conscious of the London pavements for already her spirit was ahead in Venice, trying to picture herself sailing along the Grand Canal or sipping a long iced drink under a striped umbrella in St. Mark's Square or dancing to the music of the guitars in the roof-garden of the Royal Hotel Danieli. As she stood at the corner waiting for the traffic lights to turn green, it was several moments before she became aware that somebody was calling her.

"Miss Jenni! Miss Jenni!"

She turned to see a long scarlet sports coupé drawing up at the kerb, a sleekly opulent and expensive car with Count Tolani behind the wheel. He leaned across to speak to her, his dark eyes bright with interest.

"Good evening, again," he smiled. "This is indeed a pleasant coincidence. May I not be permitted to drive you home?"

"Thank you," she answered. "It would be nicer than queueing up for the bus."

He opened the door for her to join him and was away almost before she had sat down.

"It is not wise to stand still in Mayfair," he declared. "The policemen are always waiting to pounce and produce their silly notebooks. Where is it that you live?"

Jenni gave him the address but rather to her surprise, he did not take the up-street towards Hyde Park.

"Now we have met again so fortuitously, we should take advantage of it," he said. "We might dine together and then I can tell you about Venice. If you have no other engagement this evening?"

"No. I haven't actually. But—"

"We shall go to the Dorchester then," he announced, "I can turn round this way. I am staying there as a matter of fact. We can share a leisurely meal in my suite and I will—what did you say, Miss Jenni?"

"I said I'm terribly sorry but I can't. I mean, I should like to very much but I mustn't, you see."

"I do not see," the Count observed. "You cannot possibly be misinterpreting my suggestion? If you would prefer, we can dine in the restaurant and not alone in my suite!"

"It wasn't that," Jenni said quickly, conscious she was flushing a little, "I know you're—that is, I'm perfectly sure—oh, dear! How can I explain myself? It's Mr. Erik, really. He insists we are always properly dressed when we go out and I'm only wearing my old coat and a sweater

so I couldn't possibly dine at a big hotel like the Dorchester."

The Count shot her a sidelong glance.

"You mean, for the prestige of Erik Donne it is essential his model girls must appear as if he had just dressed them on such occasions?"

"Yes. That's it," Jenni agreed eagerly. "How good of you to understand. But then you're in the fashion business yourself."

"Precisely," the Count smiled. "So then, Miss Jenni, we shall not venture into a hotel where Erik's model would soon be recognised. We will eat our dinner in Soho instead. At one of the modest Italian restaurants there. Spaghetti, risotto, piazza, veal and Sicilian cassata—you have visited one of them, no doubt?"

"Yes. A photographer I know often takes me to a trattoria in Frith Street. Yes, thank you. That would be lovely."

Contentedly she relaxed and watched the Count's skilful turning of the car. Then he threaded his way through the evening traffic in the direction of Shaftesbury Avenue. His hands were golden brown like his face. Probably he did lots of sunbathing Jenni reflected, since it would be hot in Venice in the summer. His fingers were slim yet strong and they gripped the wheel with a sense of purpose. Jenni felt instinctively that would characterise everything this man did. He was the most exciting escort who had ever taken her out. Far better-looking than Gary from Fashion Pix studios or even Peter who was an airline pilot, brother of the girl who had the next room to Jenni's at Miss MacFadden's. They represented just about the sum total of her men friends to date.

The Count took her to quite a well-known restaurant in Dean Street where he addressed the head waiter in Italian and was immediately bowed to the best table in the room. Set in an alcove, it had a pink-shaded lamp that cast

softly-pretty shadows on Jenni's head and shoulders.

"Quite friendly and cosy," the Count remarked. "Now what shall we choose to eat? And even more important, what shall we drink? You must make the acquaintance of our Italian wines, Miss Jenni."

He bought her a carnation from the flower-girl and talked to her about her coming trip. Jenni quickly decided it was the loveliest evening she had ever spent. Sitting opposite this distinguished, sophisticated man who was exerting himself to be so charming and considerate. She sighed frankly when at last she was in the car again, going homewards far too quickly.

"I hope you have enjoyed your evening, Miss Jenni?" the Count enquired.

"It's been wonderful," she assured him. "The time has gone like a flash."

"I hope it will be the first of many little dinners together. Would that please you?"

Jenni nodded.

"Oh, yes. How nice. In Venice, do you mean?"

"Exactly. We will dine at my home one evening, too. The Palazzo Tolani is a very ancient one with some fine paintings and frescoes of which we are very proud. It will be my pleasure to show them to you."

Jenni studied her gloved hands demurely for a moment.

"Thank you. I suppose—no doubt I shall meet your—er Countess too then?"

"My mother? But no. She never leaves her apartments now. Social life is over for her most unfortunately. She will not even be able to attend the showing I am arranging to hold in the long gallery one afternoon. All the evening dresses—nothing else at all. It will be sensational the way I shall give it. The highlight of the whole fashion month."

When they reached Jenni's home he helped her tenderly out of the car and bowed low over her hand.

"Good night, Miss Jenni," he said, "I shall count the days until we meet again in Venice."

"Good night," she answered. "Thank you once more."

As she walked up the steps and put her key into the front door she knew the Count was still watching her, standing there bareheaded. When she had let herself in, she gave him a quick little smile as she closed the door. Only then did she hear the sound of the big car racing away down the street.

"You've got a new boy friend, eh?" Miss MacFadden remarked, emerging from her office. "Haven't seen him before. Who would he be now?"

"I was introduced to him by Mr. Erik," Jenni answered sweetly. "Everything is quite all right, Miss Mac. Really it is."

Not for the first time she wondered how ever her landlady managed to run the house so efficiently since she invariably seemed to be sitting at her window, watching everybody who went in and out and those who passed by as well. She bade Miss MacFadden a polite "good night" and went upstairs to her room. It was nearly eleven o'clock and time to go to bed. If you didn't get your full quota of sleep, it showed in your face next morning and Madame would pass caustic comment. But for once Jenni did not begin her nightly beauty routine when she had changed into her dressing-gown. She sat down on the edge of her divan, winding her hands round her knees, and thought about the events of the evening all over again.

Jenni was a little late for work next morning. She just managed to scramble into the dressing-room on the stroke of nine-thirty, heaving a sigh of relief as she sat down.

"I thought I wasn't going to make it in time—Oh! Good morning, Madame."

"You are breathless, Jenni. Sit quietly for a few minutes to recover yourself. Then Monsieur Erik wishes you to

fit the wedding gown for Lady Gloria Danbury."

Jenni made a little grimace when Madame had given out her instructions to the models and departed again. Fitting was the thing she liked least. It meant standing patiently in one's slip while the cutter and seamstresses pulled and tweaked and draped and argued, and sometimes stuck in their pins rather too carelessly. Mr. Erik would come in halfway through the proceedings to pass his opinion. It never seemed to coincide with anybody else's and there would be tremendous hand-waving and general excitement before the cloths were pronounced creditable to the House of Donne.

She had to spend two hours on her feet in the busy work-room, supporting the rich white velvet Lady Gloria announced was "the absolute Must". When at last Jenni was released, she pulled on her dressing-gown and hurried along to the staff canteen for a cup of coffee. Sophia was sitting at one of the tables so Jenni hastened to join her.

"Guess who I met just after I left you last night!" she said to her friend gaily.

"Mario Tolani."

Jenni gasped in surprise.

"Why, how in the world did you know?" she demanded, "You must have turned back and seen us then."

"Tom told me, as I came in this morning," Sophia explained. "Said Tolani had driven up to the back door just after we left and asked which direction we'd taken. Tom saw him dashing after you and then picking you up by the square."

"Oh!" Jenni remarked, burying her face in her cup for a moment, "I thought it was just an accidental meeting."

"How naïve can you get?" Sophia said. "Try to be your age, Jenni dear."

"Well, anyway, it was a marvellous evening. He took me to dinner at a restaurant in Dean Street and we had a per-

fectly gorgeous veal dish done with cream and paprika and things. And wonderful ices afterwards."

"How you can eat like that!" Eleanor said, sitting down with them and depositing a cup of black coffee on the table. "And you never seem to put on a single pound either. You lucky creature, you! I have to starve myself right through the season in order to keep my measurements."

Nothing more was said about the Italian. Later in the morning Jenni was summoned to Erik's presence again. She found him in his studio, the big light room under the roof where he would shut himself away to design when he felt in the mood. He was surrounded by rolls of silk which a staggering porter was bringing in, muttering and tugging at his beard as he considered the spectrum of colours.

"Turquoise—no . . . This is too bright. It must be rich but still cool-looking . . . Not midnight. Not powder. Not . . . Ah, here we are! Come here, Jenni. Raise your arms."

Seizing a roll from the pile the porter was holding, the little man flung the lovely fabric round Jenni's body, wrapping her bosom and waist and letting it fall to the carpet like a train. It was an exquisite shade of blue, deep but not dark, soft and gentle. It threw Jenni's hair into flattering relief and caressed her pale cream skin effectively. Erik studied the picture through half-closed eyes for several minutes while the girl stood patiently. Then he clapped his hands, emitting a shriek of pleasure and satisfaction.

"*Venetian Dusk*," he announced dramatically. "You shall wear it with a white fur stole. There will be nothing else in the evening collection to hold a candle to it. The Americans only think of terms of cocktail frocks and no French model ever looks good in grand toilette. Off, girl!" he added, snapping his fingers at Jenni as she stepped carefully out of her drapings, "I will send for you when I am ready to cut. Hang the notice on the door as you leave."

Jenni scuttled away, putting the big *Not to be Disturbed*

card on its hook outside the studio door before she went back to the dressing-room. *Venetian Dusk* was obviously going to be superb. When Erik became impossibly temperamental he always produced a masterpiece afterwards. This then was the gown she would wear when she worked at the Palazzo Tolani, the show that was to be the highlight of the fashion month. She found a swift quiver of pleasure in the thought that she would be looking her best in an outstanding creation for Count Mario's own special event.

Both Jenni and Sophia were kept exceedingly occupied during the next two weeks. June was to be the Fashion Month in Venice so they would have to leave before the end of May and all the clothes they were to show with them. Erik and Madame drilled Jenni quite mercilessly. "A new model is always the cynosure of all eyes," Madame declared. "You will be scrutinised from every angle. So in every way you must reflect the perfection which is naturally expected from The House of Donne."

"It's terribly hard to be perfect," Jenni remarked feelingly to Nani one evening. The Oriental girl had invited Jenni and Sophia to have dinner at her tiny mews house in Kensington where she lived with her Hong Kong business agent husband and an enchanting almond-eyed baby. The house was arranged in Eastern style, soft brocades contrasting with the cool pale furniture and the white silk globe-lamps which stood on the polished floor. They had eaten shark-fin soup and fried crab-meat with bamboo shoots and other intriguing delicacies. Now they were all sipping tea from porcelain bowls, in each of which a single rose leaf floated delicately.

Nani laughed lightly.

"You do fine," she said. "If you were not so good, they would not bother their heads. You will be the sensation of Venice, Jenni. Never fear."

Jenni herself felt rather doubtful about that. She con-

fessed as much to Sophia when they were alone in the taxi going home. The elder girl had insisted on dropping Jenni first, though it meant going out of her own way to do so.

"I never know why I always feel responsible for you, dear, but there it is!" Sophia had said. Now she leaned back, her beautiful fair head outlined against the leather, frowning a little as she listened to Jenni's chatter.

"You're getting madly starry about this trip," she pronounced. "How much of it is Venice and how much Count Tolani?"

"Why, what do you mean?" Jenni asked.

"You know," Sophia answered. "You're grass-green in many ways but not quite so innocent as that. You've a crush on Tolani, haven't you? I'm sure you have so you might as well admit it."

"Well, I do think he's a wonderful person," Jenni hedged. "I've never met anybody like him before."

"That's the whole point," Sophia nodded. "Experience is what you need. And badly. Can't you realise that Tolani is a professional charmer? He likes to be seen around with pretty women and a new girl is an exciting challenge to him. He'll wine you and dine you and send you flowers and make love to you. Then when you leave Venice again at the end of June, he'll forget all about you and start looking round for somebody fresh once more. Believe me, dear, I understand men like him."

There was silence in the cab for a few minutes. Then Jenni observed in a flat little voice: "You do make him sound hateful. So light and callous."

"Not a bit. Just typical, dear."

She reached out a hand to pat Jenni's knee.

"It's only the way he looks at women. His attitude to life. It won't matter a bit if you do decide to enjoy a gay interlude with him while we're in Venice. So long as you



remember it's just a passing thing and don't let your heart get involved."

"Is he married?" Jenni enquired. "I did make a shot at finding out but he only talked about his mother."

"She's reported to be queer in the head. Certainly nobody ever sees her. No, Mario is a bachelor still. Since you're so interested in the family, he has a sister too. She's married to the Duc di Falissimo, a very grand seigneur in Rome. You'll probably meet her because she likes to bask in the limelight at the Count's fashion parties."

Jenni nodded thoughtfully and silence fell again.

"Here we are in your street," Sophia remarked at last. "I notice there's a light in the bottom window so I suppose your Scotch dragon is watching for you. Night-night, Jenni. Don't forget what I've said now."

Impulsively Jenni kissed the other girl's cheek.

"Thank you, darling," she answered, "you're always sweet to me. Yes, I shall remember every word. I'm going to be enormously cool and sensible in Venice. You'll be surprised!"

"I shall," Sophia laughed. "Because Venice isn't a place where virtues like that flourish. There's some kind of witchery in the atmosphere there. Especially at night. 'The magic of the moon' the Venetians call it!"

"I won't allow it to affect me," Jenni promised as she got out, "even if I have to stay indoors after dark."

"We'll hope for the best then," Sophia declared. "After all, you've got to grow up some day so it might as well be in Venice as anywhere else!"

CHAPTER TWO

JENNI WAS STILL in a firmly-disciplined state of mind as she sat in the airliner on her way to Venice. Unexpectedly she was travelling alone. At the last minute Erik had decided that nobody but nobody except Sophia was able to show his embroidered pink satin ball-gown to a certain Royal lady in her home. So there had been much rushing about and telephoning and hand-wringing until finally a seat had been secured for Sophia the following day. "But Jenni can leave as arranged," Madame had announced. "Everything will be ready for her arrival anyway."

So Erik had inspected her special summer air-travel ensemble of uncrushable amber cotton dress and coat with the outsize brown bag and the gilt jewellery. When he had pronounced it in order, his secretary had driven Jenni to London Airport and seen her into the hostess's care. Now she was sitting back in her comfortable armchair, staring out eagerly at the Alpine peaks below, glistening silver-white and wreathed in a kind of cottonwool floating gently just above them. She was so absorbed by all her new experiences of the day she did not even notice the glances of interest, curiosity and admiration she received from the other passengers. It was so obvious to them this lovely young girl with her immaculate make-up and elegant clothes was somebody quite out of the ordinary.

Then suddenly Jenni was conscious of a mighty jerk

and she fell forward, instinctively putting out her hands. It was like being seized by a giant and flung against the back of the seat in front. She uttered a startled cry and the man sitting next to her looked up from his magazine to say calmly:

"It's only an air pocket. Nothing to be afraid of."

The stewardess bustled down the aisle.

"All right, Miss Wells, Why, you haven't fastened your belt!" She put the strap round Jenni's waist and buckled it. "The warning went up several minutes ago. Please watch the panel."

"I'm sorry," Jenni murmured, "I was looking out of the window."

She settled herself again with a sigh of relief, conscientiously raising her eyes to the panel over the cockpit door on which all notices to passengers were flashed as required. She saw that it did indeed command *Please fasten your belt* in English and Italian. In a few minutes the words faded out again. Jenni struggled valiantly with her clasp until her neighbour put down his magazine and extricated her.

"Thanks very much," Jenni said gratefully. "I'm sorry to be so stupid but I've never flown before."

"That's obvious," he remarked. "But not to worry. You're quite safe up here."

Jenni gave him a quick sidelong glance then decided he was not really making fun of her. Somehow he did not look the kind of man who joked lightly. He was not very old—Jenni judged him about thirty perhaps—but there was a steady controlled reserve about him. His eyes were grey and unrevealing and his brown hair short-cropped and business-like. He wore a definitely English suit and a dark conservative tie. Jenni wondered idly who he was and why he was going to Venice.

He did not speak to her again until the aircraft was about to land. Then he turned to her with a quiet, "Allow

me," and buckled her safely once more. The ground rushed up to meet them and then swept past the windows. He released Jenni again and said as he handed her the brown bag:

"Can I give you a lift anywhere or are you being met?"

"Yes, I am, thanks," Jenni replied.

As they reached the doorway, she saw Count Tolani standing on the tarmac, holding a great sheaf of roses, and talking with some airport officials. Three photographers were in attendance, too, their cameras pointed towards the steps which had just been wheeled into place.

"There are my friends waiting for me," Jenni added to her travelling companion. "Quite a reception committee!"

"What! That lot! Are you a film star then?"

"No, I'm a fashion model. Would you care to have your picture taken with me?" she added mischievously. "You'd make an excellent background figure."

An expression of horror came over his face.

"Good grief, no!" he declined hastily.

"You might even get into the newspapers," Jenni chuckled. "There'll be lots of pictures of the Fashion Month."

"I can't imagine anything more unattractive," he declared. "Being in the papers, that is. Goodbye, Miss—er—Goodbye."

Raising his hat, he seized his bag and weathercoat and hurried away towards the Customs building. Jenni laughed softly to herself as she walked slowly down the steps and stood at the foot with the stewardess while the cameras were focused on them. It was a lovely day, the sky a pale turquoise, and among the blue the vivid white of wispy clouds were floating. Jenni was so eager and happy it was simple to laugh gaily and hold up a hand in greeting to Italy. "*Brava! Brava!*" the photographers yelled as they

clicked away. Behind them an interested little crowd had formed.

Then the Count came forward to lift Jenni's hand to his lips and present her with the great bouquet while the photographers took still more pictures.

"Welcome to Venice, Miss Jenni," he said. "We have all been looking forward to seeing you."

The crowd applauded vigorously, whistling and snapping their fingers and passing loud comments on Jenni's beauty. She had no idea who these people were but she smiled politely towards them. The airport officials had to be introduced as well. She was surrounded by a dozen admiring escorts as they all moved towards the Customs building. Here is was only the merest formality to pass her numerous cases and bags. The uniformed officers smiled and bowed and wished her enjoyable days in Venice and then she was swept off once again, this time to the Count's familiar Alfa Romeo. Several bareheaded teenage boys in striped shirts crowded round it to stare openly at the girl as the Count drove off. It was startling to Jenni to meet so many dark eyes all fixed upon her face at once with unwinking intensity.

In a few minutes the Count was stopping the car again beside a broad expanse of water. There was a quay with a handsome white motor launch tied up, a smartly-attired sailor waiting on the cobblestones beside it. The Count motioned Jenni to take his hand and step on board. "Oh, do we go by water?" she exclaimed.

"But, yes. Everywhere in Venice one travels by water. There are pavements to walk on but no roads for automobiles. You will see the steamers and the buses on the canals, and of course the gondolas. They are just our horse-carriages as it were. Quite pretty but also slow. For everyday business it is better to employ the engine!"

Jenni sat down on the cushions and looked out at the

skyline of the buildings on the opposite side of the lagoon. Then she turned her attention quickly back to the Count as he seated himself beside her and asked unexpectedly :

"Tell me, Miss Jenni. Who was the man to whom you were speaking as you left the aircraft just now?"

"Him? Oh, just my neighbour on the journey. I don't know who he was."

"Not a friend from London?"

"Goodness, no. I've come alone, Count Tolani. To work. What about all my luggage? Is it—"

"My men will attend to that," he answered. "Your clothes will be at your hotel when you arrive. The consignment from the House of Donne has already been unpacked. It came yesterday and everything was found to be in perfect order, all ready for you to wear."

"Thank Heaven for that!" Jenni said. "Now I can relax at last. What's that big cream dome over there? Is it one of the famous churches? I've been reading about those in the guide-book."

She chattered gaily as the launch sped across the water and into the centre of the city, the Count pointing out the different landmarks to her. "It's just like the travel posters come true," Jennie declared as she saw the Venetian scene in all its warm bright colour. The tall white and pink and yellow houses with their graceful balconies decked with hanging baskets of brilliant flowers. The scarlet and gold-striped mooring posts at the steps which led up to the squares. The black gondolas and the little motor boats going along the dreamy willow-swept canals. The steeples and the towers and cupolas, and everywhere the pretty white stone bridges. Over it all there was a strangely fascinating atmosphere, an air of being a magical city removed from the workaday world, fabulous and enchanting.

"So you like Venice, eh?" the Count smiled. Jenni became aware he was watching her animated face with a

certain quiet amusement. Quickly she sat up erectly, remembering she was an elegant sophisticated fashion model who never appeared excited.

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm afraid you're thinking me rather silly and schoolgirlish, Count Tolani. Getting thrilled like this. I'm very sorry. Perhaps you'd prefer me to talk about the big introductory fashion show. That's being held tomorrow night, isn't it?"

"Tomorrow evening at nine, Miss Jenni. Our Fashion Month opens with the party at the Hotel Danieli. Miss Tozi will tell you the details. She is the lady who acts as hostess for our visiting models during the month. She is waiting to meet you at the hotel."

There was still an undertone of amusement in his voice. As he met Jenni's eyes he laughed softly.

"Please do not trouble to pretend with me," he begged charmingly. "It is refreshing to find somebody who can show such appreciation of Venice. You need not feel guilty in admitting it so openly."

"Only, you see—"

"Certainly I see Mr. Erik gave you a strict lecture before you left London! So you will work, Miss Jenni. And be the sensation of the shows."

"Do you really think so?"

"There is no doubt of it," the Count declared. "But you will have some leisure too and then it will be my pleasure to make sure you enjoy it. Ah, here we are! Approaching the Hotel Zucci where you are to stay."

The launch glided smoothly up to a flight of stone steps and two uniformed porters dashed down them to seize Jenni's luggage in the stern. The girl stepped ashore and walked up to a broad terrace with flowering shrubs where people sat around in low wicker chairs. Everybody looked at Jenni curiously. She walked past them with professional aloofness, wearing the same faint distant smile she put on

when she went into the salon. She did not even take any notice of a long masculine whistle. With Count Tolani, she walked into a cool marble-floored reception hall and was welcomed by the hotel manager.

Then an extraordinary woman came forward. She was tiny and brown-skinned, with an upstanding mop of fuzzy black curls and a mouth gashed with mauve lipstick. Her pointed face was sharp-featured and wrinkled. 'Like a monkey's' Jenni thought as she met the keenly-scrutinising black eyes. They swept over her from head to foot, then more slowly back again, studying and noting every detail. Miss Tozi herself was exquisitely dressed in white.

"Ah, so this is Miss Jenni," the quick high-pitched voice exclaimed, "from Erik Donne of London. We expect their Miss Sophia tomorrow, I remember. How do you do, Miss Jenni? Welcome to Venice."

A small hand with long mauve-painted nails shot out and clasped the girl's wrist.

"Come with me," the hostess continued, "I will show you the room you and Miss Sophia are to share for your stay. Your maid is already there attending to your wardrobes. Erik Donne has sent us some interesting clothes I am sure—there is no need for you to remain, Mario. I shall take care of Miss Jenni now. *Arrivederci*."

The Count laughed and bowed.

"Goodbye for the moment, then," he accepted. "I leave you in excellent hands, Miss Jenni. Miss Tozi is the most efficient lady. We shall be meeting again tomorrow night at the Danieli."

Her jewelled bracelets clinking, Miss Tozi carried Jenni off to the elevator, talking all the time.

"You speak Italian?" she enquired. "French? Spanish? German? We have models from all those countries here for the fashion month. Still you will be able to make conversation easily with the two girls who have come from

New York at least. You will meet them at the party this evening. I will tell you all about that presently."

She ushered Jenni into a big luxuriously-furnished room with twin beds, overlooking the canal. An Italian maid was carefully unpacking the cases and transferring the contents to the wall-cupboards. Erik had provided his models with a complete outfit of exclusive new clothes for their own wear, quite apart from the designs they were to show in the parades. Even shoes and cosmetics and lingerie were included. "In every way you must express the standing of My House," he had declared.

"This is Gina, who will serve you and Miss Sophia," the little hostess rattled on. "She is accustomed to the charge of fashions so she knows what you will require. She speaks some English too. Now please to rest this afternoon. Take the siesta as we say. Then at six o'clock you will present yourself in the salon below. The Duchesa di Falissimo will greet all the models there and you can take refreshments. No alcohol you understand. The juices of fruit which are better for the proportions. Afterwards we shall tell you of the various events to be held during the month and what plans have been made for your part in them."

Jenni felt quite breathless by the time Miss Tozi rattled and bustled out of the room. Gina smiled at her new charge understandingly and held out a pair of satin mules.

"Mees would like to prepare for the siesta" she asked invitingly. "One needs the relaxation after the aircraft travel."

"Not yet, thanks," Jenni said and got rid of the maid as soon as she could. She felt she wanted to be alone for a little while, to absorb all these new experiences properly. Locking the door behind Gina, she slipped quickly out of her yellow dress and into slacks and shirt. Then she went over to the big window and pulled up the slatted blind so she could look at the animated scene.

It was a fascinating panorama, all the busy life of the city flowing past her balcony for the Hotel Zucci was situated beside one of the main tributaries to the Grande Canale. The gondolas were filled with brightly-dressed people or piled high with fruit and vegetables, their straw-hatted gondoliers poling industriously. A boat full of black-robed nuns sailed by, followed by a gaudy little steamer on which a group of students were playing guitars and singing. By craning her neck, Jenni could see one of the little bridges and watch the pedestrians strolling over it. One young couple were leaning against the parapet, hand-in-hand as they contemplated the eternal waters below. Nobody seemed to be in any hurry in Venice. Even the circling pigeons had all the time in the world to enjoy the peace and the sunshine.

Immediately opposite across the canal was another large redstone building and on one of its fretted balconies a man was standing looking out at the animated waterscape just like Jenni. Suddenly she recognised her neighbour of the aircraft. At the selfsame moment he glanced across and saw her too. He nodded politely, lifting one hand in a little gesture of salutation. Jenni nodded and smiled back at him before she went inside again. Doubtless that building was another hotel and he was staying there.

Dutifully Jenni next took a short rest on her bed. She appreciated she must appear completely fresh again when she appeared in public. Then she began to prepare for the introductions party. She knew keen and maybe even jealous professional eyes were going to study her and she had to pass their test successfully. It seemed to her the fir-green taffeta with the swirling skirt would be the best choice in the circumstances. Gina's admiring comments confirmed this, so when Jenni finally left her room she felt she was indeed looking her best. With her head kept high, walking like a princess, she went downstairs and hoped nobody

would realise how nervously her heart was thumping. She wished Sophia was here now to lend her courage and support.

To Jenni's relief the other models assembling in the long tapestried salon were disposed to be reasonably friendly. Miss Tozi, glittering with sequins, promptly introduced her to the American girls, Carol and Jane, both incredibly tall and slim with smooth corn-coloured hair falling to their shoulders. It was their first visit to Venice too, their one thought to visit the Lido and swim there. Completely uninhibited, they chattered incessantly to Jenni as they all waited for the party to begin.

It was an entirely feminine gathering, which did not disturb Jenni personally but displeased both of her companions judging by their remarks about "hen coops" and "girls' schools". Presently Miss Tozi clapped her hands for silence. A petite dark-eyed woman wearing a pale mink stole stood up on the dais and formally welcomed the models to Venice. Miss Tozi translated her words into the various languages and then lined up the guests to be presented to "*La Duchesa*."

So this was Count Tolani's sister, Jenni thought! Very striking and poised, a delicately-modelled porcelain figure but still giving an impression of coldness and hardness. There was none of the traditional Italian passion in the Duchess, nothing of warmth in her beautifully-gowned figure and fixedly smiling face. She did not appear to resemble her brother at all.

When it came to Jenni's turn in the reception line, Miss Tozi announced her name and nationality. Carlotta di Falissimo stared keenly at the girl as she touched her hand, an odd little gleam flickering into her brown eyes for a moment.

"Miss Jenni," she repeated softly. "Ah, yes! To be sure!"

She spoke in English and it seemed to Jenni there was

a curious undertone in her voice but the girl could not pass any remark, only smile graciously and pass on towards the buffet. There she caught up again with Carol and Jane who were considering the fruit juices and iced sodas disdainfully.

"Not even a cocktail to help the show along! Say, what is this? A hotel or a reform camp? I wanna try that cinzano drink they were telling us about on the plane . . ."

Jenni took a glass of limeade from the waiter and as she was raising it to her lips, she chanced to glance over her shoulder. A few yards away the Duchess and Miss Tozi were talking together in low conspiratorial tones, their eyes fixed on Jenni herself. Instinctively the girl knew she must be the subject of their conversation. She gave a vague suggestion of a smile in their direction then deliberately turned her back and began to talk to Carol. Soon Miss Tozi was clapping her hands once more, bidding the models sit down while she detailed arrangements for the various showings and functions of the month. Out of the corner of her eye, Jenni saw the Duchess quietly leaving through the gilded doors.

Dinner was served to the models in a private room, with the emphasis on steak and salad and non-fattening desserts. Then the indefatigable Miss Tozi handed round instruction sheets and maps and suggested the girls retired early. "At ten o'clock in the morning, you will please to be at the Hotel Danieli to rehearse for the opening parade and there will be no more rest for you until midnight when it is over."

Most of the models were hurrying out of the room almost as she finished speaking. Carol and Jane made a beeline for the bar. As they entered, Jenni saw two Italian men rise from their chairs to introduce themselves with smiles and bows. They were obviously delighted to be able to play hosts to the lovely newcomers. Jenni did not want to join

the drinking party and as there was nobody else who seemed to speak English fluently, she nodded to a French girl and a Dutch one and went upstairs to her room.

Jenni imagined she would undress, study her printed instructions for a time then go to bed. She had not reckoned with the irresistible magic of Venice at night. When she went to adjust the blinds, she found herself looking out at a picture of dazzling light and shade, breathing air scented with flowers and holding the strains of music. The water below was dotted with the golden lamps of the passing gondolas, their strange poops like prehistoric animals as they clove the rippling blackness in the gentle warmth. Gilded frescoes and marble walls gleamed in the floodlights, while over them all the gilded Lion of St. Mark's stood on his tall column looking down benignly at his incomparable city. Jenni stared and stared again. Then she knew she would have to go out.

Quickly she found the green taffeta coat that matched her dress and slipped it on as she ran lightly along the corridor and down the stairs without even waiting for the lift. She had already seen that the opposite side of the hotel from the canal opened into a little square—"the *campo*" as Miss Tozi had called it. This was almost as bright as day, thronged with people, and beyond it stretched out tantalising little alleys lined with miniature shops, all illuminated too and obviously doing business though it was after nine o'clock.

Gaily Jenni went out, her high heels clicking on the ancient cobblestones. Two elderly American tourists smiled at her and she smiled back, caught up by the lovely wonder of it all. Her auburn hair glinting as the light touched it, she walked across through the crowds to the narrow alley. Eagerly she gazed into the window of the first small shop, its shelves filled with glass and crystal. There were colourful harlequins and brilliant figurines, fantastic little animals

and beautiful drinking goblets and chandeliers glittering with fairy-like drops. Jenni stared and admired, then suddenly she became aware she was not alone.

Looking up she met the unwinking black eyes of a half a dozen young Italian men all fixed steadily upon her. They were similarly dressed in bright shirts and linen slacks and long pointed shoes. White teeth flashed in swarthy faces as they began to speak to Jenni in English.

"The signorina is on her own. But no pretty girl should be without an escort. It is unthinkable. Not right . . . The signorina is from London? There is much to see in Venezia . . . The signorina likes to promenade. The signorina is so ravishing tonight . . . *Bellissima! Bellissima!*"

Jenni assumed her haughtiest expression.

"I don't want your escort, thank you," she declared clearly, "I prefer to walk by myself. So please go away."

They did not take the slightest notice. They stood there grouped around her, still with their open gaze, passing loud admiring comments about Jenni's dress and hair and skin and figure quality. It didn't make her feel at all the goddess Sophia had prophesied, only annoyed and a little embarrassed. Several times she repeated her request but the men did not move off. Finally she pushed one of them bodily out of her path and hurried up a side alley as quickly as she could. To her vexation they all kept up with her, running when she did, continuing their barrage of compliments and flattery. People glanced at her with amusement but nobody rebuked the persistent cavaliers. It appeared to be quite a commonplace little scene.

All Jenni's pleasure in the romantic night had vanished now. Desperately she looked round and to her intense relief she recognised a certain fawn weathercoat over a male arm. It was her neighbour from the aircraft, standing there observing the group with a slight frown. Eagerly, thankfully, Jenni stretched out a hand towards him.

"Please help me," she called. "These wretched men simply will not go away when I tell them to."

He came up to her and took hold of her arm, tucking it into his own. Immediately, without a word the Italians sighed deeply as one man and melted into the crowd again.

"If you go around alone here, you'll get that kind of thing," her rescuer said to Jenni. "They can't understand a girl wanting to be without a male companion. It's a challenge to them."

"But half a dozen at once giving you the rush is too much," Jenni declared. "Well, I mean, really!"

"Not surprising," he remarked. "You're a glamour-puss, aren't you? Especially in that outfit."

"Don't you like it then?" she enquired.

"I don't know the first thing about women's clothes. But you are outstanding and so you naturally attract attention. Do you want to go back to your hotel now?"

"I suppose I'd better," Jenni said. "Only I did come out to look at the place and see the shops."

"Look at them as we go back," he suggested. "I don't mind waiting for you. I'm in no hurry."

Happily Jenni thanked him and applied herself to the opportunity. He stood on guard at her elbow as she admired the little windows filled with laces and silk embroideries, with porcelain and silverware and glass and still more glass. One shop held only glass jewellery, rainbows of necklaces and brooches, ear-rings and bracelets. "However do they get them so incredibly fine?" Jenni wondered.

"Just a matter of the pipe," her companion explained. "You use a very small aperture to produce a piece for a bead that size. When you're blowing the glass, I mean," he added as he saw her puzzled look. He went on to give her a concise description of the traditional Venetian art.

"The glass-works are over on the island of Murano," he wound up. "I expect you'll be taking the trip over there

one day. It's a regular tourist haunt. But you'll find it interesting, I think."

"You sound as though you're an expert on glass," Jenni remarked. "Are you?"

"Well, yes. That is, glass is my business. I'm here to work at Murano for a few weeks and study the new designs and processes there."

"A glass-blower yourself, in fact?"

"A Big Cheeks," he smiled. "I'm certainly one of those. I can blow a pipe of glass with anybody. My father taught me when I was quite a lad. We live at St. Helens in Lancashire, you know. The home of the best English glass and crystal."

They had reached the end of the alleyway and turned into the little campo on the far side of which the Hotel Zucci raised its imposing façade.

"Would you care for some wine before you go in?" he asked, indicating the open-air café under the striped awning. "Or coffee or a bit of piazza maybe?"

"Thanks, I daren't eat again now, but I would love a cup of coffee," Jenni decided.

"You're at the Zucci, aren't you?" he said as they sat down. "I saw you at your window, of course. I'm at Guido Carra's place just opposite. Cheap and cheerful. It suits me very well because I can catch the waterbus to work at the corner. By the way, I'd better introduce myself. I'm Martin Heywood."

"I'm Jenni Wells."

"I know," he replied. "I asked an officer at the airport who you were. They seem to be making a great fuss about this Fashion Month. Do you enjoy being a model?"

"Yes. It's hard work at times but rewarding, too. I'm just a beginner actually. I only started modelling professionally in January and this is my first overseas job."

"You seem to be doing quite well at it," he told her.

"You've achieved the cool, beautifully-polished look already."

"Oh, models are quite human," Jenni smiled. "You should see us without the make-up sometimes. We look exactly the same as other girls then!"

"I'd like to," he answered, "because when you look as you do this minute, you make me feel afraid."

"Afraid! Of what?"

"That you'd be put out if your hair got accidentally ruffled or if I was unlucky enough to spill my coffee on your dress."

"It would be a calamity if anything got spilled on this particular dress," Jenni agreed. "It's insured for three hundred pounds." As he whistled, she added: "It's a model from The House of Donne, you see. And Erik Donne is the most exclusive dressmaker in London. I'm terribly lucky to work for him."

"Who on earth buys clothes at that price?" Martin enquired.

"You'd be surprised," Jenni laughed. "Mr. Erik expects lots of orders as a result of this Fashion Month. Some of these rich American women want a dress or a coat immediately they see it."

"I've noticed bills up about a grand beachwear parade at the Lido on Sunday week. Are you in on that?"

"Yes. Would you care for a ticket? I can get you a complimentary one," she added delicately.

"Sweet of you," he replied. "but junkets of that sort aren't much in my line. Though I'm sure you look delightful in a swimsuit. In fact, I'd love to run you out to the beach this Sunday if you're free. And if you'd like to come with me, of course."

"I'm not quite sure yet what's expected of me on Sunday," Jenni began. "I can't remember whether anything is organised for us models then or not."

Her words trailed away as she heard a suspicious pattering on the awning over their heads. "It surely can't be raining!" she exclaimed in horror.

Martin glanced out. "Just one of the usual Venetian showers," he remarked. "Short and sharp—they're a feature of the place. You'll soon learn to carry a raincoat when you go out."

"I haven't brought a raincoat with me," Jenni said miserably. With all her clothes, it apparently had not occurred to Erik there might be a day when Venice was not bathed in sunshine. It wasn't as if you could get a taxi to take you from door to door either! She sighed and Martin said quickly:

"Cheer up. It's quite all right. Lots of the shops sell weathercoats and very natty umbrellas too. Pink and gold and what-have-you. Now tell me some more about yourself. I know you've come from London but is that actually your home?"

They talked for another hour and still the rain poured down.

"Not short tonight anyway," Jenni remarked drearily. "I do hope it will clear off soon. It must be getting late."

"Twenty past eleven. Do you want to get back to the hotel now?"

"I should," she told him. "I need my full sleep quota tonight so that I can be fresh in the morning. It's going to be quite a day by all accounts. The opening show is always a bit of a trial."

"Right then," he said rising. "Let's be off."

"I can't," Jenni answered. "It's still coming down in torrents and my clothes would get wet."

"And your boss would be wild. That's easily solved. Here, have my raincoat. It'll keep you dry while you run across the square."

"Thank you. That's very kind. But I still can't go out into the wet though."

"Why? What else is the matter?" he asked.

Silently Jenni extended one slender leg towards him. Her foot was encased in a delicate slither of fir-green taffeta touched with gold embroidery to match her dress and an absurdly slim golden heel.

"I daren't spoil these sandals," she said. "Mr. Erik would never forgive me. They were specially made to go with this outfit."

"You do have problems, don't you?" he remarked. "Still I think I can fix that for you all right. Put my coat on first—here, let me help you."

When he had wrapped her in it, he picked her up in his arms like a child and with the laughter and chatter of the other café patrons drifting after them, he ran with her across the square to the steps of the Hotel Zucci. His arms were firm and strong and he did not appear to find her any weight at all. Gratefully Jenni gasped as he carried her through the glass door which the smiling porter hastened to hold open for him and deposited her gently on the foyer carpet.

"There you are!" he said. "A few drops on your hair—that's all."

"Oh, thank you so much," Jenni said. "You're a marvellous person. I can't tell you how relieved I am. It really was the sweetest thing to do."

"I must say I enjoyed it myself," he smiled. "Good night then, Miss Wells. Have a good time tomorrow."

"Good night," Jenni smiled back. "I expect I shall be seeing you again."

"You certainly will," he promised. "Good night."

As Jenni began to walk towards the lift, she suddenly caught sight of Miss Tozi standing near the marble staircase with several of the models. They were all staring in

her direction and Jenni realised they had obviously seen the manner of her arrival home. Not that it mattered she decided. It might have been unconventional but her precious clothes had been saved. She liked Martin Heywood even upon such brief acquaintance. He was solid and practical and plainly kind. It might be very pleasant to go to the Lido with him one Sunday afternoon at that. Nodding to Miss Tozi politely, Jenni stepped into the lift and was shot upwards out of sight.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS MIDNIGHT at the Hotel Danielli and the fashion show had just concluded with the traditional wedding procession. Jenni, who had been the centre figure in it, was now standing in the crowded models' dressing-room, the cries of "*Brava!*" still ringing in her ears as Gina deftly whisked off her chiffon veil and helped her out of the bridal gown. Erik had called this "an inspired masterpiece" and Jenni acknowledged he was right for it was certainly one of the loveliest gowns she had ever worn. A spindthrift of cobweb-fine white lace light as gossamer, floating above a huge wide skirt that swept the floor and unexpectedly went in to the tiniest possible waistline. Erik would be very pleased to hear of the wild enthusiasm his design had aroused among the distinguished audience tonight, accustomed to elegant clothes as they all were.

"Goodness, I'm tired!" Jenni remarked to Sophia beside her. "So must you be after travelling all morning and working for the rest of the day."

"One of those things," Sophia replied. "A model gets used to them.—*Pardon, mademoiselle!*" she said firmly, retrieving her eye-shadow from the French girl on her other side. "Still, you brought it off tonight, Jenni dear. Congratulations."

"I was nervous as a kitten. But of course it was wonderfully thrilling. This glorious old hotel too—Oh, sorry!" she

ejaculated to an excitable blonde fraulein tugging at her cushion. "Is it yours, then?—Now we have to cope with the Count's supper-party, haven't we? What are you wearing?"

"That Chartreuse silk. Gina is just getting it pressed. If you wear the violet, we shan't clash."

"Then I will."

Jenni slipped and wriggled herself into the purple-flowered chiffon, found the bracelet and the enormous brooch that were its appointed jewellery and re-touched her lipstick. Stepping over Carol's kimono which lay on the carpet and cautiously negotiating an outsize hat, she made her way with Sophia out of the noisy overheated room with its chattering occupants. Two Italian girls followed them. They were the four models who had been specially invited to sit at the chairman's table for supper. The committee of the Fashion Month were staging a sumptuous meal to close the first evening in the accepted manner. Count Tolani had told the two English models they were his personal guests.

"It's an honour, of course," Sophia had enlarged to Jenni later. "I expect the truth is Tolani really wants you up there with him. But it would look too pointed if he didn't ask me along as well. Now he can always say he's only paying tribute to The House of Donne!"

It was the most wonderful supper Jenni had ever eaten, a meal that seemed to epitomise all the glamorous luxury which characterised the hotel. The Count's long table was laid with exquisite pink lace mats and porcelain and crystal, cunningly decorated with roses in a deeper red and becomingly candle-lit. It stood beside the open terrace on the roof so that one could look out at the breathtaking panorama of Venice at night. Somewhere in the background an orchestra played sweetly yet never loudly enough to disturb the conversation.

Everybody talked about the show and the new fashions which had been revealed, speculating which were most likely to capture world fancy. Women in different countries had such diverse tastes. The Count sat at the head of the table and kept the discussion lively. Jenni had been placed at his right hand while Sophia was on his left. Several times Jenni happened to glance along the board and found a pair of dark eyes watching her enigmatically. Carlotta di Falissimo seemed to keep a sharp watch on her brother in public. The Duchess had earlier given Jenni a few gracious words as they met before supper.

"Like tossing a bone to the puppy," Sophia observed cynically. "They say she's always jealous of any girl who catches her brother's attention."

But there was nothing forced or half-hearted about the praise and the compliments which were heaped upon Jenni during the meal. Several wealthy fabric manufacturers and their wives were present and they all congratulated the girl lavishly. Her looks and her performance had passed the supreme test tonight and everybody was anxious she should be aware of the fact.

"Now you will be famous," Miss Tozi had said quietly. "But do not cultivate the big head, Miss Jenni. There is always somebody else who is determined to be a famous model too and she may not be far behind you."

"At last I do feel like a goddess," Jenni remarked to Sophia much later, "I know exactly what you meant when you said that. These Italians do behave so charmingly. And Count Tolani is absolutely bliss!"

The two girls were back at the Hotel Zucci again. The Count had brought them home in his private boat, kissing their hands in turn as he murmured, "*Arrivederci*" at the foot of the stairs. Sophia, who was kicking off her silver slippers, commented dryly: "Yes. I noticed he was putting forth his best efforts for you. And he's no amateur at the

business either! He's obviously fallen for you in a big way, Jenni."

"Do you think so?" Jenni yawned then. "Perhaps he has at that. Oh I've never been so weary as this in all my life before. My eyes feel as though they were filled with sand."

"Bathe them then before you get into bed," Sophia advised. "It's photography session nearly all day tomorrow—or rather today. Mercy, it's after three already! And you were up late last night too, weren't you?"

"Yes. I was. But how did you know?"

"One of the French girls told me you were carried into the hotel by a man just before midnight. Did you mix your wines in a café or something?"

Jenni laughed.

"I drank coffee—nothing else," she declared and told Sophia about Martin Heywood. The elder girl had been methodically cleaning off her make-up. Still holding the soiled tissue, she stared at Jenni then slowly shook her head.

"Well, you do veer about the social scale," Sophia observed. "The wealthy influential Count Tolani one day and a poorly-paid workman the next."

"A workman?" Jenni repeated.

"Yes. That's what a glass-blower is. You'll see them when we go out to Murano on Saturday. They wear leather aprons and cheap shirts and they sit on wooden benches huffing and puffing at hot glass and twisting it around. Hardly the right kind of boy friend for you, my dear!"

"I don't care what sort of a job a man does."

"Maybe you don't but what about Tolani? He won't exactly relish his favourite model of the season running loose with a glass-blower. Now will he?"

"Perhaps not but—I still can't understand why his work should make any difference," Jenni maintained. "Martin

Heywood is nice, Sophia. You'd like him so please don't be a snob."

"It isn't a question of snobbishness," Sophia said, "just commonsense. You surely don't want to upset Tolani. He can do so much for you now you've established yourself as a fashion personality. His influence is colossal."

"He's promised to take me sightseeing on Friday," Jenni remarked. "Of course there'll be cameras along as well but even so . . ."

"There you are, you see. You be sensible and wash the glass-man out. Now get into bed before you drop on your feet. I'll be putting my own head down in a few minutes too."

Brief as her rest was, Jenni could still jump out of bed at eight o'clock and hasten across to the window to stare at Venice below.

"Do come and look at the people going to work on the water-bus," she called to Sophia, just beginning to stir. "There are such funny old women in black shawls. One's actually nursing a baby pig—"

"At this hour," Sophia shuddered, opening her eyes and reaching for her cigarettes. "My legs won't even support me until I've swallowed my cup of coffee. Ring for Gina and ask her to bring our trays, there's a sweet."

By ten they were on their own way, sitting with Miss Tozi and several other models in the stern of the special motor-boat the committee had provided for their transport. Jenni and Sophia were both wearing linen pants and vivid silk shirts and dark glasses. "Then it doesn't feel so bad when the men stare," Sophia explained. Though not even this disguise kept some members of the opposite sex from whistling and calling out as the boat slid past them. The photographers were Italian too and "they want to make a date with every picture, *n'est-ce pas?*" as Gabrielle from Paris remarked. Jenni was swathed in a dramatic black and

white topcoat, posed before a wrought-iron gate in an ancient courtyard, when the dashing young man holding the flash-bulb suddenly tried to kiss her. She was so taken by surprise she fell back against the gate which promptly parted in the middle and caused her swain to execute a most ungraceful parabola movement to the mosaic pavement. Jenni began to giggle and Gabrielle joined in.

Sophia being otherwise engaged at lunch-time, Jenni shared a table with the French girl in the café to which Miss Tozi took her charges. Gabrielle chattered away in broken English about the celebrities of the Paris fashion world. Madame Chanel—"Ah, she knows what she wants from her models does that one!" The fabulous Monsieur Balmain and Monsieur Yves St. Laurent—"so patient and kindly always." In France, it appeared, a leading model could earn enough to provide herself with the most elegant apartment and every luxury, as well as getting her clothes free from the great couture houses for which she showed. There were holidays at Cannes and Monte Carlo, "and also one has the social position assured. Fashion is prestige in Paris always."

It was intensely fascinating to Jenni, this glimpse of the wider horizons which her new professional success would open up for her now if she cared to try. She was in unwontedly thoughtful mood as they all went on to the great art gallery to prepare for another showing and a TV parade there that evening. Her reception in Venice had served to stir her ambitions. She swept her gorgeous silks and velvets across the marble floor that night with fresh enthusiasm, the applause and the cries of admiration sweet music to her ears.

On Friday morning Count Tolani arrived to take Jenni off sightseeing as he had promised. Today the models were free to do what they wished until the evening. "Just time to draw breath in between I guess," Carol put it. Sophia

was going to spend her time at a beauty salon.

"You're young enough yet not to need body massage," she remarked to Jenni enviously. "Me, I've got to simmer and suffer for hours now."

"Yes, but I must remember not to eat ice-cream again," Jenni declared. "It's so important to keep my measurements right to the very last quarter inch. If I'm ever to become a top model . . ."

"So you do want to be one?" Sophia observed. "Well, I can't blame you. The rewards are certainly golden for any girl who's able to make the grade."

"That's why I came to London in the first place," Jenni nodded as she fastened her white silk suit. "There were no opportunities for me in Little Woodbury. It was hateful always having to look at every shilling twice."

"Well, you're lucky enough to have the chance of success now," Sophia told her. "After all your marvellous publicity this week. So be nice to Tolani today and he'll probably help you another step up the ladder—or even several steps."

"But does that entail letting him make love to me?" Jenni wondered. "I do get the idea he'd like to. The way he stroked my arm last night as we were coming home. He was looking at me quite ardently too."

Sophia lifted her shoulders.

"What do a few kisses matter between friends?" she enquired. "You find Tolani attractive, don't you? He's certainly an expert with women. Keep your head and don't be idiotic enough to fall for him seriously and you'll be all right."

"Should I? You know, Sophia, I haven't had any experience with men. At least, not men like the Count."

"Then now's your opportunity to learn!" Sophia laughed. "You'll need to know how to manage men skilfully if you're going to succeed in life!"

"Be sensible and practical and not let yourself get too starry-eyed," Jenni nodded. "I will remember those rules. I only wish it wasn't quite so difficult!"

The Count arrived punctually, his advent being heralded by a large bunch of carnations which the smiling Gina delivered to Jenni's room with her breakfast tray. As Jenni joined him in the hotel foyer some of the other models were nearby too, asking for letters at the desk and buying newspapers and demanding information from the porters. Jenni was well aware of feminine eyes that followed her as she went off and knew the gossip would be flying behind her. There had already been one open display of jealousy at the previous day's showing, when the tall stately Miss Arni from Sweden had suddenly put out a foot on to the train of Jenni's satin ball-gown. Jenni had just managed to whisk it away in the nick of time.

"Why, you did that deliberately!" she exclaimed.

Miss Arni had laughed tauntingly.

"The Count would have paid the bill for you!" she said in her precise English and walked on to the stage before Jenni could reply.

"That Swedish hunk surely has turned sour," remarked Jane, who had observed the little incident. "I guess she's wild because she was crazy to get Count Tolani for herself. You just watch out for her, honey."

This morning Jenni found herself quite relieved to be away from the familiar atmosphere for a little while. Nobody could have been a more entertaining or considerate escort than the Count. Impeccable in his light fawn suit, his handsome face aglow, he squired Jenni to all the ancient treasures of Venice, "*Fata Morgana*" as he called it, obviously proud to be showing off his beloved city. Reverently Jenni gazed at the wonders of San Marco, staring up at the famous copper horses of the cathedral which had originally been carried off from Athens by the Romans. She blinked

at the Clock Tower with its brilliant colours and dazzling gilt, explored the Doge's Palace and the Byzantine churches and the arts museum. It was all a glorious chiaroscuro effect of paintings and statues and tapestries and mosaics. Jenni felt quite breathless by the time she looked down at the shining waters from the Rialto Bridge over the Canale Grande.

"It's a magic city," she declared. "Thank you so much for letting me see it like this. I do appreciate all the trouble you've taken for me."

He smiled at her tenderly, his arm touching hers as they leant against the parapet looking across the blue expanse dotted with its myriad craft.

"It is affording me great pleasure, Jenni," he told her. "I'm sure Venice is delighted too, to be shown such a lovely stranger. You are a very rare person because you have quick intelligence as well as beauty. They do not often go together."

He took her to lunch, at an expensive restaurant inevitably, where his straw hat was frequently swept off towards fashionably-dressed women as they went to their table on the terrace. During the meal he talked about the show of evening clothes to be held at his palazzo the following week.

"I have a special dress for that," Jenni remembered. "Mr. Erik said I wasn't to even describe it to anybody in advance. He's called it Venetian Dusk."

"Which is a most flattering compliment," the Count declared. "In the evening, I want you to dine with me in my home if you will be so gracious, Jenni. There is a *Fresco Notturmo* that is, a floating musical festival when the boats are all illuminated and the bridges hung with garlands of light. We can watch it passing from the balcony after dinner."

"I'll love to," Jenni accepted eagerly. "It sounds heavenly indeed."

His smile deepened as he watched her face.

"I do not think you will be disappointed, Jenni," he murmured. "It is going to be a night you will remember for always, believe me. And I, Mario Vittore Carpaccio di Tolani, do not break my word!"

The showing that evening was private, devoted to Italian fabric manufacturers and their staffs. Afterwards the indefatigable Miss Tozi took all the models on to an open-air function attended by the Mayor and his Councillors attired in fur and velvet robes, their jewelled chains of office round their necks. They were heralded by trumpeters and accompanied by a brass band. When the tumult had died down a little, Jenni found herself sitting with Carol and Gabrielle on a raised platform in the square.

"One is much regarded in Venice, eh?" remarked the French girl. "There is a man who has been fixing his eyes upon you for a long time now. Ma foi! He even approaches to address you!"

Jenni glanced down and saw Martin standing a couple of feet below her. Promptly she leaned down towards him.

"Oh, hello," she smiled. "What's this affair in aid of? Do you happen to know?"

"They're going to draw the first prize numbers in the lottery," he replied. "One of those good old Venetian customs. You seem to be part of the decorations up there."

"Yes. We're on duty," Jenni agreed. "I wish it was over, just between ourselves. I'm terribly hungry and quite a bit bored, too!"

"You haven't brought a raincoat either," he remarked.

"Oh, we're thoroughly cosseted while we're on the job," she laughed. "There are maids with coats and umbrellas and overshoes and simply everything all ready in case of need. It wouldn't do to spoil an embroidered dress like this one I'm wearing."

"You always look as though you should be kept in a glass

case," he frowned. "I've been reading about you in the local newspaper and seeing your pictures. You seem to have made a great success here. I don't wonder at it either."

Before Jenni could reply, the trumpets sounded again and Martin had to return to his place among the spectators while attention focused on the platform. Jenni herself was invited to make the first dip into the huge golden tombola; the number of her choice was announced over the loudspeakers to be greeted with shrieks and yells and shouts, accompanied by noisy hand-clapping and feet-stamping. "My ear-drums are bursting." Carol moaned. "If only I'd brought along some cottonwool in my carry-bag!"

As Jenni and Sophia were getting ready for bed that night, the elder girl asked suddenly: "By the way, who was that man you were talking to? The one who came up to the platform?"

"Martin Heywood. My glass-blower."

"I thought maybe it was," Sophia replied. "He's not bad either. He stood out among the Italians like a piece of good old English granite among the marble!"

"Yes. Martin is the sound, direct type," Jenni agreed. "Not hard though. Quite easy to get on with actually."

"The Tozi had an eyeful of you both," Sophia remarked. "Not really wise in public, you know, dear."

"Well, I can't help it. He came up and spoke to me," Jenni pointed out. "Even a chaperone ought to realise I could hardly be so rude as to ignore him."

"And the Duchesa noticed the exhibition too," Sophia added.

"The Duchesa di Falissimo? Oh, was she there tonight. I didn't see her."

Sophia laughed as she worked her skin-food into her throat and shoulders with well-practised rhythmical strokes.

"You'd have frozen in mid-air if you had," she declared. "She was sitting on the other side of the platform, quite

close to me. The look she gave you when you drew that first ticket was positively vicious. If she'd happened to have a dagger in her hand, she'd have thrown it at you!"

"Honestly, Sophia? You're not joking?"

"Quite serious. Carlotta was flaming wild. No mistake about that."

"But why?" Jenni wondered, staring wide-eyed. "Do you mean because they asked me to draw the ticket and not her?"

"Precisely. Since Carlotta is a Duchesa and Mario's sister as well, she counts herself as The First Lady of the Fashion Month. She probably only appeared because she expected to be invited to start the drawing."

"But the Mayor asked me to do it! I didn't offer."

"You still superseded her, my dear. Know something? I've a shrewd notion it was Tolani himself who made the suggestion about you to the Mayor."

"Oh, dear!" Jenni sighed. "So now I've upset the Duchesa I suppose and she's angry with me."

"Jealous would be the best word in the circumstances, Jenni. Just like that Swedish creature who's got her knife into you. It seems Tolani told her he admired stately blondes when he took her out to dinner in Stockholm. But when he came on to London to choose the British models and met you, he changed his mind. Yes, dear," she finished, as she saw Jenni's expression. "It's a definitely complicated business being the reigning princess of a big international fashion festival. Don't you forget it!"

"I'm not likely to get the chance, it seems," Jenni answered sadly as she started to brush her hair.

Next morning Jenni and Sophia set out for the glass-making isle of Murano. They were accompanied by Gina and a porter in charge of the boxes of clothes they would wear for the various pictures, as well as the two crack photographers from *Madame Today* who had just flown in from

London to make a series of fashion studies against the unusual background of the famous factory. Protected by her dark glasses and the porter's stalwart figure, Jenni sat on the deck of the steamer taking them along the lagoon. She reflected again that notwithstanding all the incidental snags, it was still marvellous to be here in Venice on this fine early June morning.

She found the glass-making just as fascinating as Martin had said she would. The whole island lay under a permanent pall of grey-black smoke spouted forth by the numerous chimney-stacks of the workshops. "The glass was brought here many years ago because of the danger of fire in the city," Gina explained. Jenni, in a flame-coloured dress, was immediately made to pose beside one of the great furnaces in which the rough transparent material was heated until it became soft enough for the skilled blowers to manipulate into delicate works of art.

"Smashing colour effect!" declared the chief photographer happily. "If that doesn't make the September cover, I'll eat my lens-box! Now let's see what I want next from you, Jenni, my sweet!"

He decided she should next assume an attitude of concentrated interest beside one of the glassblowers. So Jenni went off to the office which had been given over to the models and changed into a pair of skin-tight black velvet pants with a richly-beaded emerald jacket. When she returned she found the photographers occupied with Sophia, so she lingered to watch an old man making tiny figurines. He took a lump of glass and blowing gently on his pipe, twisted and twirled the hot blob at the same time nipping and turning it with a hooked instrument. Soon it began to take on the rough shape of a human body.

"That's much more difficult than Guiseppe makes it seem," said Martin's voice at her elbow. Jenni looked up to see him smiling at her. As Sophia had predicted, he was

dressed in a cheap white cotton shirt and thick leather knee-boots that could protect his rough trousers from any possible splashes of molten glass.

"So this is where you work," Jenni said. "Of course. You told me."

"Yes. That's my bench over there. Come and look at my menagerie."

He led her across to a littered table while the other workmen laughed and whistled and threw out merry remarks. Jenni exclaimed with delight at the quaint miniature dogs and pigs and rabbits in different coloured glasses.

"Oh, how sweet. I adore this funny one with his head on one side. You've caught his expression perfectly."

"But it's still got several flaws," Martin said, "I'm only trying my hand really. I want to acquire the feel of this delicate little stuff so it can be produced in Britain, too."

"Do let me see you make something," Jenni begged, "it's so intriguing to watch a lump being turned into a lovely ornament."

"All right," Martin agreed, sitting down, "if you've got a few minutes to spare. What would you like?"

"Anything. I don't mind. They're all pretty."

"I shall make a piece specially for you. As a gift, I mean."

"Will you? That would be nice. But is it—er—all right with your employers?"

"Quite," he assured her. "I'll do a deer for you then. I'm not bad with those." He looked at the small iron trays which were heaped with the rough glass in every imaginable colour. Carefully he selected a piece of amber with his scissors and held it over the flame-lamp on the table.

"A golden fawn," he added. "It seems appropriate for you somehow, Jenni. There, that's ready now. Watch me closely."

His breath down the pipe was even and his fingers deft

so the little animal quickly took shape. It was a charming fancy and Jenni smiled with pleasure.

"Oh, that is gay!" she declared. "Thank you so much, Martin. I'll have to call him Bambi, won't I? May I take him away with me when I leave?"

"It won't be ready," Martin explained. "The glass must harden properly before it can be touched. I'll drop it in at the Zucci on my way home tonight. You won't be in then, I suppose?"

"No. I shall be showing at a party the British Ambassador has arranged. In the something-or-other Galleria. Furs chiefly, so I'm trusting the room won't be too hot tonight!"

"What about tomorrow?" Martin asked as he placed the fawn on an adjacent shelf. "I asked you to spend it with me. Remember?"

"Oh, yes. At the Lido. I want to see that. We're doing the beachwear show there. The one in aid of the orphanage."

"Not at the Lido proper," Martin corrected, "that's the fashionable playground with the large hotels. The aristocrats and the millionaires go there. No, I'm inviting you to the people's beach where the ordinary Italian families spend their Sundays. It's quite a gay spot. It has some jolly restaurants and bars and a puppet-theatre and there's music everywhere. The swimming is good too. How about it, Jenni? Do you fancy a bit of simple fun as a change from all your glamour flapdoodle?"

Jenni hesitated. Sophia certainly wouldn't approve and Miss Tozi would probably have adverse views as well. In any case it was pointless to go out with Martin anyway, since he had no importance in the fashion world and could not help her career forward. That must be the paramount consideration at all times now. She was going to become a top international model in the not-too-distant future. Jenni was about to tell the man sitting in front of her she had

another Sunday engagement but suddenly he smiled at her. His grey eyes were warm, asking for her response, his usually well-controlled face much gentler than she had ever seen it before. Inexplicably her heart seemed to skip a beat. She knew that quite foolishly she would accept his invitation.

"Yes, please, Martin," she said. "What time shall I meet you and where?"

"Ten o'clock on the corner quay where the water-buses leave. Unless you'd like me to pick you up at the Zucci?"

"No, don't do that," Jenni said hastily. "We have a chaperone in residence—I'd much rather she didn't know. The quay will do fine. I'll be there."

"That's wonderful, Jenni. We'll have ourselves a whale of a time, I promise you."

It had happened just right Jenni thought as Sophia and the two photographers bore down upon them.

"What on earth are you chattering about?" Sophia began. Then she recognised Martin. "Oh!" she observed succinctly. The chief photographer screwed up his eyes as he contemplated the scene.

"Yes," he pronounced, "you could stand a little more to the left, Jenni darling. With an expression of surprise I think. The man can be doing his stuff with one hand raised—does he speak English or shall I call the interpreter?"

"I am English." Martin told him coldly, "and I'm not going to have my photograph taken either."

"But it's all been arranged with the manager, old chap. You'll get a fee from us, naturally."

"I'm still not being shot," Martin maintained. "Just steam off to one of the other benches. Old Guiseppe there ought to make a good picture for you."

"You're right! But absolutely!" the photographer exclaimed. "Those wrinkles and the expression—positively symbolic, especially when you contrast with a young girl!"

You run and change into the tweeds, Sophia angel. I'll shoot Jenni with this engaging patriarch—Where's that interpreter, Desmond? Bring him over here."

As the photographers descended upon Guiseppe, Jenni smiled at Martin blithely.

"See you tomorrow," she murmured. "It's going to be sheer joy to relax at that!"

He leaned towards her. "Just one thing, Jenni, please. Come in your everyday clothes not one of your grand outfits. And don't put a lot of stuff on your face like you have now."

"This is only for the cameras," Jenni said. "Don't worry. I'll be a really plain Jane tomorrow."

"You couldn't be one if you tried," he answered. "And why should you when you were born so lovely?"

"Nice compliment! And yet you won't deign to pose for a photograph with me beside you!"

"No," Martin frowned. "Sorry, Jenni, but it's out of the question. I've sound reasons for refusing, I assure you. Only I'm afraid I can't explain them to you just now."

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN JENNI CAME to consider the actual mechanics of spending a day with Martin it was by no means an easy business. She even began to question the wisdom of it, wondering if it would not be better to change her mind and concentrate entirely on her job instead of playing truant. She was restlessly turning things over in her mind that night as she walked gracefully up and down the red carpet in the gilt-mirrored chandelier-lit galleria with the fountains playing outside. She was so preoccupied she quite forgot to open her snow-leopard jacket and reveal the startling magenta satin lining, only remembering with a guilty start as she came back to the dressing-room. She almost decided she would not go but devote herself to getting some rest in bed, with a hairdressing session and manicure during the afternoon and then perhaps consult Miss Tozi about a suitable way to spend the evening. But even as she thought about it, Martin's smile came back to her and that quick instinctive response stirred in her again. Martin was not handsome and debonair and gallantly fascinating like the Count but there was something about him which had caught her imagination just the same.

One problem worrying Jenni was the question of dress. Everything she had in Venice was the property of Erik Donne, a superbly elegant wardrobe and just what Martin did not want her to wear. Even the suits she was to show

at the Lido parade were ultra-fashionable beachwear, though Jenni felt she dared not borrow them for the occasion anyway. She had no opportunity of dashing into a shop either. Then suddenly she had an inspiration.

"Gina!" she said when she was alone with the maid for a few minutes, "I suppose you go to the beach, don't you?"

"Sì, signorina. I go tomorrow with Varani to whom I am affianced. Very gay, very pleasant."

"I'm sure it must be. But what do you wear? Shorts and a shirt?"

Gina shook her black head.

"But no, signorina," she declared, "it is not proper for a good Italian girl to dress in such things on Sunday. I have dress—cotton one. Very pretty. I wear it over the swimming suit so then it is possible for me to look decently."

"Would you lend me a dress, Gina? Just for one day. We're practically the same size. You could bring it with you when you come in the morning. I want to go down to the beach myself tomorrow, you see."

Gina's black eyes gleamed avariciously.

"Not tell Signorina Tozi, eh?" she asked. "How much you pay me?"

"Oh! Well, I suppose I might manage a thousand lire."

"Okay, signorina. I bring dress for you."

Jenni wondered what Sophia was going to say about all this. Her friend had inevitably mentioned the incident at Martin's bench as they were coming back from Murano on the steamer.

"That glass-blower seems to haunt your path, darling," Sophia had remarked. "Well, now you've seen him as he is at least."

"Yes. And I still like him," Jenni had retorted sweetly.

"He's not to be compared with Mario, of course," Sophia went on. "Incidentally I hear the party at the Palazzo Tolani is to be utterly fantastic, even for Italy. We're to

rehearse both on Monday and Tuesday to make sure everything goes smoothly. He's got one of the top bands coming from Rome and a special plane-load of flowers is being flown in from Sicily."

"Sounds impressive," Jenni agreed. "It's a five o'clock showing, isn't it? With champagne buffet for the guests afterwards. And the Count has asked me to stay on and dine with him later."

"What! At the Palazzo?"

"Yes. He said we could sit out on the balcony and watch the musical procession on the canal."

"He did, did he?" Sophia remarked. "There'll be some tongue-wagging at the Zucci next morning, darling! Because you realise what this invitation means, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Jenni nodded. "He's singled me out and now he wants to make love to me."

"It'll be in the romantic manner, too," Sophia prophesied. "Trust Tolani for that. He'll create the most wonderful background for your *tête-à-tête* dinner. He's a perfectionist all the way."

She paused and looked at Jenni questioningly but the girl did not answer. She sat there on the wooden seat looking rather dreamily at the passing houses with their pink roofs and creeper-draped balconies overhanging the water and the spires and domes gleaming bright on the horizon above them. Wednesday seemed an age away in the future as yet. Meantime there was Sunday. Tomorrow and the beach and Martin Heywood.

That night Sophia announced she proposed to sleep late in the morning.

"I shan't get up until noon," she said. "I know you go off duty early tomorrow, Gina, so don't bother about a breakfast tray. I'll get some coffee in the restaurant when I'm ready."

Gina inclined her head. Her eyes swivelled round to

Jenni, a conspiratorial glitter in their depths. While Sophia was safely in the bathroom, a thousand lire changed hands.

"*Grazie tante, signorina.* I will be most quiet in the morning . . ."

As Jenni fell asleep she was reflecting it might have been the preparation for committing a crime instead of just taking a day's relaxation she had undeniably earned. She had never suspected the problems of becoming a top model would be so awkward and complicated to solve. How could anybody be expected to work all the time in Venice anyway, when the sun and the smiling tranquillity and the gentle gaiety in the air all combined to whisper of the other things in life?

Gina was as good as her word. Early on Sunday morning she opened the bedroom door and beckoned to Jenni, who was already waiting. Ten minutes in the bathroom while Sophia still continued to sleep blissfully and Jenni was all ready to slip out. The dress was a cheaply simple blue cotton and Jenni put it on over the black bathing-suit she had discovered in the souvenir-kiosk in the hotel foyer. She felt delightfully young and merry as she went, savouring her freedom like a glass of heady wine. The porter who was sweeping the steps blinked at her in surprise. Models who rose at this hour on a Sunday were a phenomenon to him.

Jenni almost skipped over the cobblestones of the square and past the weeping willows to the quay. At least fifty people were already waiting there, cheerful husbands with plump wives and numerous children, girls in frocks like her own, swaggering young men in striped trousers and violently-patterned cotton jackets who inevitably stared and whistled and put out tentative fingers towards her. Then Jenni saw Martin standing there, a little apart. She thought affectionately how comfortably English he looked in his

dark linen slacks and open-necked blue shirt. Italy was heaven and the Italian cavaliers enormously flattering and good for the self-esteem, tossing their admiration in front of you all the time like flowers. Yet there was still a lot to be said for the companionship of a man as trustworthy and quietly reliable as she knew Martin Heywood was.

"Here I am!" she called to him happily. Martin's eyes lit as he turned to her. In that moment Jenni realised she was important to him, short though their acquaintance was. The knowledge was confirmed in his smile of greeting and the tone of his voice as he answered cheerfully:

"Hello, there, Jenni. Punctual too. What a remarkable girl! Looking forward to your outing?"

"Oh, yes. I want to bathe and see the puppets and even eat macaroni—I simply don't care today! Do I look all right? I haven't got a spot of anything on my face except lipstick."

She spun gaily round for his inspection.

"Ah, *bellissima*!" sighed the garlic-laden voice of a swarthy Italian boy nearby. Martin frowned at him warningly before replying, "You look lovely, Jenni. Just as I hoped you would."

"We aim to please, sir!"

"Did you get your fawn safely?"

"Yes, thank you, Martin. He was waiting for me, at the desk when I got back last night. I shall treasure Bambi because he was specially created for me."

So began a madly joyous day, filled with laughter and warmth and a sense of being utterly removed from the mundane ordinary world. Jenni enjoyed it to the full. She sat close to Martin in the crowded water-bus as it steamed along the lagoon, playing pokey with a black-eyed bambino in his mother's arms, tapping her feet to *Con Amore* coming over the loudspeakers, even eating the almonds which Martin bought her.

"I shouldn't be doing this at all," she declared. "I think I've gone quite crazy today."

"So long as you're happy, what does it matter, Jenni?" he asked.

"It ought to matter," she replied. "I should really be feeling terribly guilty at playing truant. But I don't. I just feel gloriously reckless and excited."

"That's Venice," he smiled at her. "And with your hair tossing like that and the colour in your cheeks, you're an adorable little girl. I don't wonder the men keep on staring at you. They don't see anybody as fresh and lovely as Jenni every day."

The beach was silver-white and smooth, all sand and never a pebble in sight. They bathed and played ball with half a dozen laughing young Italians, and presently lunched in the open-air restaurant with its flower-boxes and free red wine. Afterwards they went back to the beach again and fell asleep in the hot afternoon sunshine just as dozens of other people were doing. Jenni woke to find her head pillowed on Martin's shoulder. As she opened her eyes, he grinned at her drowsily and she had an exquisite sense of comfort and security. Here with Martin like this all the stress and effort of the last few days seemed to evaporate and leave her refreshed. She sighed contentedly and went to sleep again.

Later on they swam again then went to watch the puppets. There was a carousel too, and Jenni insisted on riding an exotic purple ostrich which she shared with two small boys. Presently they wandered along, hand in hand, back to the restaurant where the terrace was lamplit now and given over to dancing. The gay couples did not seem to make the slightest difference to the waiters. Their faces shining, chuckling and exchanging repartee with the customers, they moved about the crowded floor as uninhibited and relaxed as everybody else appeared to be.

"Will you dance with me, Jenni?" Martin asked.

"Yes. Let's."

When his arm went round her, the feeling of heaven was intensified. It was like being banded with safety again. She had not realised before how tense and taut her nerves had become after all the demanding events of the previous days. She surrendered to Martin gladly, leaning her head against him just as the Italian girls were doing with their boys.

"It's like being in another world," she sighed, "an enchanted world where time doesn't exist any more. Are there really things called clocks,"

"You're happy then, Jenni?"

"Oh, yes! It's all been such tremendous fun today."

"I'm happy too," he said softly against her hair, "because I know now I was right. I always thought there was a real girl underneath all that fancy make-up and those elaborate trappings. The kind of girl I've been looking for for a long time. I'd almost begun to despair of finding her until you came along."

Momentarily they danced out of the lamplight and Jenni felt his lips against her forehead.

"My sweet!" he murmured. "Lovely Jenni. How can I find the words to tell you what you do to me?"

Then they were back in the brightness again, too enmeshed by the moving crowd for anything of tenderness or the intimate minute. They sat down at their minute table, chairs touching those of their immediate neighbours. Martin ordered iced coffee and pistachio nuts.

"You speak Italian like a native," Jenni remarked. "Where did you learn?"

"Night school," he replied, "over ten years ago, when my father decided I'd better go to Italy to learn about this particular side of glass-making. I've been coming regularly ever since to keep my knowledge up-to-date, so I get plenty of practice."

"Tell me about your father and everybody," Jenni commanded. "Fair exchange because I told you about Little Woodbury and Aunt Emmy and Cousin David and everything this morning."

She sat with her chin propped in her hands, listening as Martin talked. He explained how his grandfather had first made glass—"so dad followed on and now it's my turn to continue the tradition." He was proud of his craft and his home town. "It's typical Lancashire, industrialised and a bit grimy in parts. But there's country just outside and it's only a few miles to the coast."

At last they walked reluctantly back to the pier where the water-bus was waiting.

"I hate to go," Jenni said as they stepped on board. "I'd like tonight to run on for ever and ever."

"So would I."

There were so many other young couples on the crowded deck, scores of lovers engrossed in each other and unmindful of everybody else. It seemed natural for Martin's arm to go round her waist as they sat so close together. Beside them a swarthy boy and his sweetheart embraced with fond affection. The whole world smiled at them, the soft night air and the music and the moon in the canopy of the deep blue-black sky, and all the friendly understanding Italians around them.

"I'd like to kiss you too, Jenni," Martin whispered. "But not here. Not until we're alone. The first time is far too precious to be less than perfect."

It was only when they were walking into the little campo that Martin halted in the shadow of the trees, a pool of darkness among the moonlit stones. His arms went around her, holding her close.

"Jenni! Oh, Jenni!" he murmured. "My little love."

His kiss was warm and masterful. Jenni responded to it instinctively, her soft mouth quivering a little at his touch

yet contented and satisfied. Martin released her slowly, taking a deep breath then brushing his lips against her hair again before he let his arms fall away.

Gently he drew her on then and they walked the brief distance in the moonlight to the steps of the Hotel Zucci. Its façade shone brightly and the porter hurried to hold the door open for Jenni with a smiling bow.

"Good night, my darling," Martin said to her, "I shall see you again very soon."

"Good night, Martin. Thank you for my gorgeous day."

With a little gesture like a salute, he turned on his heel and departed. Jenni entered the hotel foyer with a sense of slowly wakening from a beautiful, sensuous dream. She felt aglow with a strange mysterious pleasure it was impossible to define. Glancing up at the ornate clock she saw to her surprise it was almost midnight.

Several of the other models were sitting at one of the tables with glasses of milk or fruit juice. Carol called across gaily.

"Hey, there, Jenni! Come and have a nightcap drink with us. Where've you been all the day, huh? We missed you."

Yvonne from Paris nodded and winked.

"She has been with her man friend, *n'est-ce pas*? Regard the bright eyes and the lipstick all smudged!"

"Maybe I have," Jenni agreed smiling. It was only when she sat down she noticed the tall yellow-headed Arni was one of the group. The Swedish girl looked at Jenni thoughtfully.

"Blue cotton and so creased," she remarked. "Is that the latest notion from The House of Donne then?"

"No. This is—my dress actually."

Arni raised her eyebrows.

"So?" she observed. "But we have been instructed we must only wear the special clothes we have brought from

our Houses during the Fashion Month. It was written in the booklet I was given on my arrival. Miss Tozi has also said so to me."

Jenni did not reply. She had a horrid feeling now that this was undoubtedly true. It was one more of the snags she had refused to contemplate when she went off so gaily with Martin in the morning sunshine. Night was bringing its retribution and she had to face the consequences. Her heart, which had been so light, began to sink though she would not allow Arni to have the private satisfaction of seeing that.

She stayed a few minutes longer, drinking her orange-squash and discussing Monday's programme, then went upstairs. Sophia was sitting up in bed, an astringent chin-mask strapped on her face, glancing through a magazine. She looked up as Jenni came into the room and exclaimed in horror :

"Jenni! What on earth have you been doing?—As if I didn't know. You've been out with your glass-man."

Jenni nodded smiling.

"Yes. I've had a heavenly day at the beach with him. Why are you staring at me like that, Sophia?"

"You're sunburned!" the elder girl exclaimed. "Oh, that nose! You must have been out of your mind today. Just look at yourself."

Jumping out of bed in a flurry of silk and lace, Sophia rushed across to Jenni and propelled her to the mirror.

"See those pink patches?" she said. "They'll be brown in the morning, How could you do such a stupid thing? Oh, dear! This is positively tragic."

"Why?" Jenni wondered, "I don't suppose I shall peel. I never do. And there's no reason why I shouldn't have a lovely day, is there?"

"You're going to have a vile day tomorrow if you aren't extremely careful," Sophia declared. "For goodness sake, stop looking so starry-eyed and use your commonsense. How

on earth can you model the black chiffon cocktail and the white roses dance dress and all the other numbers with patches of brown dotted all over your face? How are you going to photograph in that state, pray? You should never have sat in the sun in the first place. I did warn you about it before we left London. Remember?"

"Yes, so you did," Jenni agreed. "I'd quite forgotten. But why fuss about a touch of suntan anyway? All the girls I see around Venice seem completely brown at that."

"Only they don't happen to be models," Sophia said. "Here, take my jar of skin-food and put a bit in your palm. Now work a few drops of peroxide into it and smear it on the patches. It may do the trick and bleach the tan right out but at worst, it'll tone it down. Go on! Get on with it, Jenni!"

Jenni did as she was told. Her features daubed with the cream, she sat down on the edge of her bed and kicked her sandals off. Sophia sniffed as the cotton dress slid down to the carpet too.

"That looks like something from one of the bargain-cellars we saw yesterday," she remarked. "How could you go out in it, Jenni?"

"Gina lent it to me. I'd nothing suitable myself and I couldn't take any of the salon dresses of course. Arni made nasty remarks about it too as I came in."

"She'll make even nastier ones to Miss Tozi tomorrow," Sophia prophesied. "You're in for a lecture there in any case. She kept on asking me where you were today and I hadn't the foggiest notion. Why on earth didn't you tell me this morning or leave me a note or something?"

"Because I thought you might not approve," Jenni told her frankly. "I know you don't think much of Martin."

"Are you in love with him, Jenni?"

It was so direct Jenni could not answer for a moment. She had not thought about Martin analytically as yet. She

sat there wriggling her bare toes and finally answered very slowly :

"I'm not sure. I only wish I was."

"You've hardly known him five minutes, of course."

"The funny part is that doesn't seem to make any difference," Jenni said. "I feel so at ease with Martin. That's the only way I can describe it. When he kissed me just now, it was natural and right. As though we belonged to each other and we both knew it without bothering to put it into words. But why should it be that way?"

Sophia had returned to her bed. As she plumped up her pillows, she observed coldly :

"Rather confused, aren't you, dear? I fancy you stayed out in the moonlight overlong."

"The magic of the moon," Jenni smiled. "Yes, perhaps it was that. And yet . . ."

"You've a lot to learn about life and men, Jenni."

"Yes. I know I have."

Sophia sighed and began to ensconce herself among the bedclothes for the night. She pulled the sheet up to her ears then she pushed it down again and sat up. Patting her chin-strap to make sure it was still taut, she looked at Jenni and said :

"It's late to embark on a lecture, goodness knows! But I am responsible for you as the senior girl from The House of Donne. Stop gazing into space, Jenni, and look at me instead. I'm going to read the riot act and it's entirely for your own good."

Jenni grimaced but she recognised Sophia meant her well and was undoubtedly in charge.

"All right," she admitted, "I suppose I've asked for it. Go ahead. I'm listening."

"You can't go on like this," Sophia told her flatly, "so you'd better do some serious thinking. Now I don't want to dictate, Jenni. Your romantic affairs aren't my concern."

But when they start interfering with your work and spoiling it, then I've got to give you a reprimand and a warning. You do understand that, don't you?"

Jenni dropped her eyes, uncomfortably aware her friend was right. She had been careless, putting the prospect of gaiety shared with Martin before the things she ought to have considered first and foremost.

"Going out in that cheap cotton," Sophia went on. "You look like any girl in the street, not an exclusive model from a famous fashion salon. Why, if that got back to London, Mr. Erik might well be angry enough to sack you on the spot!"

Jenni looked up sharply.

"Sack me! Oh, surely not! I thought I was doing so well here in Venice. All the publicity and the nice things people have said to me."

"Exactly. You've made the grade. Got your big chance of real success now and jolly lucky you are. It doesn't happen to many girls as easily as it's come to you. But don't you see that if you continue to behave in this crazy manner you'll destroy us all? You can't keep on breaking the rules and running about with time-wasting undesirables when you ought to be concentrating on the job. You should have been at the afternoon concert with the rest of us, you know. As Tozi rightly says, models are not here to amuse themselves but for the prestige of their Houses."

Jenni got up and walked over to her favourite spot at the window, staring between the blind-slats at the moonlit canal beyond, a silver-streaked black ribbon flowing gently between the tall buildings. A little to the left was the Carra where Martin was staying. She turned round and looked directly at Sophia as she answered:

"Martin isn't an undesirable, though. He's the kind of man you can lean on. He'd never do anything that wasn't honest and straightforward."

"He does seem to have captured your imagination," Sophia observed. "Oh, I grant you he probably is a solid type and as trustworthy as a man can ever be. That doesn't make the slightest difference actually. He's still undesirable for you."

"But I like him, Sophia. So much," Jenni protested though she still felt she was fighting a losing battle. "Couldn't I sort of combine Martin with my work? Be more circumspect, I mean."

"Be your age, Jenni," the elder girl exclaimed. "How on earth could a glass-blower, an artisan, call him what you will—how could he fit into a model's life? Or do you want to give it all up anyway?"

"No," Jenni said quickly. "I don't. You know I don't, Sophia. Only it does seem so hard I can't have . . ."

"You can always have Tolani," Sophia reminded her. "He's handsome and charming enough for anybody. I thought you were smitten with him. You certainly seemed to be that day we had champagne in Mr. Erik's room after the spring showing."

"Yes, I do think the Count is attractive," Jenni said. "He's completely different from Martin, of course. In character, I mean."

"Well, you concentrate on him," Sophia advised, wriggling down under the sheet again. "He can be enormously useful to your career. Keep your head though and don't let him sweep you off your feet. There's plenty of time for you yet. You're barely nineteen, at that. You be wise and wait for romance until you've met lots of men and looked round a bit more. You're sure to find somebody rich and desirable who'll want to marry you later on. Girls like you always do. Whereas if you lose your head about this Heywood man, you might just as well have stayed in Little Whatsits in Somerset and helped your aunt breed bull-terriers. It's poise that does it, Jenni dear. All the time."

She closed her eyes then, composing herself for sleep. There was a good deal Jenni longed to say but she knew it would be useless. She merely answered: "Thank you, Sophia. Good night," and blinked back the tears that suddenly, ridiculously, began to prick at her eyelids. What a miserable self-deflating end to her lovely, lovely day!

In the morning Jenni found to her relief the patches where her skin had caught the sun were almost imperceptible when she put on a heavier make-up than usual. Not that they escaped the eagle-keen professional eyes of Miss Tozi. The volatile little woman was busily collecting the models in the hotel foyer ready to take gondolas along to the Palazzo Tolani where they would hold the first rehearsal for Wednesday's grand showing. She swept Jenni over with a searching glance, from head to foot and back again. Then she said:

"So, Miss Jenni. You were evidently at the Lido yesterday. One sees the sunburn. I had been most anxious for you all day."

Jenni reflected quickly she had better not add fuel to the flames by confessing she had actually been on the public beach instead of the more aristocratic play-spot.

"I was swimming," she said ambiguously. "I felt I needed some fresh air and exercise. To relax after all the work."

To her thankful surprise, Miss Tozi nodded.

"Ah, yes. One understands the English have such tastes. It is the way to spend the Sunday in London no doubt. But I must remind you that you are now in Venice and required to attend the official parties and other functions of our Fashion Month. It is part of the contract the committee have signed with your House. You are not to run off whenever you wish. If you should have the need for air and sports again, then please to speak to me. I will inform you whether it is permissible that day or not."

"I see," Jenni murmured contritely. "I—I didn't quite

grasp it, I'm afraid. I'm terribly sorry, Miss Tozi. I will do exactly as you say in future."

Volubly, with a few more admonitions, she was forgiven and sent on her way.

"Get a dressing-down?" Sophia enquired as they settled among the gondola cushions.

"Yes, I did," Jenni replied. "You can say 'I told you so,' if you like."

"No need to be catty, darling."

"We're being treated like schoolgirls," Jenni grumbled perversely. "So many rules and regulations."

"Discipline. That's all. You'll get used to it in time. Now let's forget all about the whole affair. I'm aching but aching to see the palazzo. They say the paintings alone are worth a fortune."

It was indeed a glorious place, a pile of red and white fourteenth-century stone built by an artist's hand, with vaulted windows and a magnificent portico with statues of ancient gods and goddesses forming the pillars. Inside, everything was equally grand and luxurious. The models trooped up a broad marble staircase into a richly-carpeted ante-room; beyond was the enormous library in which the showing would take place. Jenni stared admiringly at the fluted white columns supporting the painted ceiling and the ancient tapestries on the walls. Yet for all its grandeur the palazzo still had an air of being lived in. Roses and carnations were massed in the golden bowls and somewhere close at hand a dog was barking. A steward in a black velvet jacket hovered beside the double doors, two pretty young maids in attendance with him.

Miss Tozi stood on one of the carved chairs and presented the master of ceremonies—"The Signor Foscari who will direct you most efficiently." He was a tall, white-haired man of considerable elegance. He made various flattering remarks to his audience, translated into different languages

by Miss Tozi, then produced a long yellow stick which he proceeded to wave. "He has been a ballet-master at La Scala," one of the Italian models explained to Jenni.

Count Tolani came in to watch the rehearsal progressing. He was bare-headed, and wearing a casual jacket, two apricot poodles at his heels. The proceedings were not unlike a ballet, Jenni thought, as the signor's wand commanded the various positions and groupings for the models and the orchestra practised their accompaniments for the different girls. Only evening clothes were going to be worn on this occasion. It was an open secret that every designer had sent his most sumptuous dresses. International competition was fierce for the highest volume of praise at this glamorous parade before the distinguished audience. The prizes that would follow success would be rich and enviable. Jenni and Sophia had been told so by Mr. Erik himself in London.

"Remember that you represent The House of Donne," he had said. "And England too, of course. You can add fresh lustre to our name in Venice—it lies entirely within your power."

When it came to her turn for a solo walk, Jenni covered the length of matting that would be a red carpet on Wednesday, turned swaying a little at the end and came back again. As she stepped off the matting, Sophia walked out and Jenni stood beside the wall watching her critically. If either girl showed the slightest fault, then the other must tell her about it later.

The Count came up and stood beside Jenni.

"Good morning," he smiled. "I am sorry I have not been able to give myself the pleasure of talking with you these last two days. There have been so many business affairs to settle. You are still enjoying Venice, I hope?"

"Who wouldn't find it an adorable city?"

"You are going to be the star of this showing on Wednes-

day," he told her, dropping his voice, for several other girls were standing in their vicinity. "The signor has his instructions, so you need not worry. And afterwards you are going to dine with me, of course. We shall be able to celebrate your success then."

"I hope so," Jenni said, "I must be a credit to Mr. Erik."

"He would hardly have sent you here if he hadn't felt sure of it," the Count smiled. "You are required again, I think. The signor's wand is pointing in this direction."

Jenni went back to work. A little later, she happened to glance across the floor and saw Carlotta di Falissimo had come in to join her brother. She was dressed in grey silk pants and a white shirt, and was holding a sheaf of papers in her hand. She was talking to the Count and Miss Tozi but her eyes were fixed on Jenni. As the girl met them she saw the gaze was cold and searching, boding its object no good. Jenni felt a little nervous shiver running down her back at the other women's expression. She told herself bravely this was silly and fanciful, but the impression was still vivid.

After the long rehearsal, there was a photographic session. In the afternoon the models were all required to talk to newspaper reporters and fashion magazine writers, taking tea and cocktails with them at a leading hotel beside the Canale Grande. It was nearly eight o'clock before Jenni got back to the Zucci. Sophia had arrived ahead of her and as the girl pushed open the room door, her friend was speaking on the telephone.

"Absolutely but absolutely not," Sophia was saying. "So you'd only be wasting your time if you did ring again . . . No. I can't possibly do that . . . No. I'm sorry but there it is. Goodbye."

"What's all that about?" Jenni asked. "You were being terribly firm."

"One must be sometimes," Sophia declared as she took

off her silk jacket and reached for a hanger. "Where on earth has Gina gone now? I want her to hook me into the pink jersey silk. As a matter of fact," she continued, "it was your glass-blowing friend. He wanted to come round and see you tonight. I told him you were far too busy."

"Too busy! Why, what—"

"Because it's true," Sophia answered calmly. "You are. We're all bidden to the gala opening of this new nightclub. Tozi's orders."

"It's the first I've heard of it," Jenni said.

"Gondolas at nine," Sophia nodded. "Short skirts—you'd better have the violet organza, I suppose. Gina did press it again I remember."

"What exactly did Martin say?" Jenni demanded. "Please tell me that at least."

"Suggested he rang you later. I said you'd be out. I also said I couldn't deliver any message."

"That was mean of you," Jenni declared, flushing. "That couldn't have done any harm."

"Oh, yes, it could," Sophia retorted. "It would have disturbed you for the rest of the evening and you need to keep your mind on the job. There are sure to be lots of press people at the club, and all kinds of celebrities, too."

Jenni bathed and changed almost in silence. She knew Sophia was right but she was reluctant to admit it. Obviously it was useless to attempt any further association with Martin. She had to be dedicated to her ambitions now and he had no place with those. That was hard and bitter to accept but it was true. The trouble was she liked Martin so much. His quietly reserved manner, still without any stiffness. That slow smile lighting his grey eyes attractively. His manner of regarding her as though she was something infinitely precious to him, always to be cared for and protected. Even the way he had reacted so instinctively when the Italian beach boys had insinuated themselves too close

to her, staring and exclaiming. As she put her feet into her silver sandals, she heard herself sighing aloud.

Sophia turned round to look at her.

"You know, Jenni," she said, "if you do want to run over to Martin's place and spend the evening with him, you're perfectly free to do so. Only you'll have to take the consequences afterwards and they won't be pleasant."

"Such as, for instance?"

"Your absence would have to be explained to Tozi, naturally. She'd go to the committee with a complaint I'm afraid. After all, it would be the second time you let the House of Donne down."

"I'm not letting it down now," Jenni said. "I'm coming to this night-spot. Haven't I just dressed for it?"

"I'm writing to Mr. Erik tomorrow," Sophia continued. "He asked me to send him a full personal report."

"Do I get an honourable mention," Jenni wondered, "or am I in disgrace?"

"Of course you're not, dear. He knows how successful you've been so far. After all, he does read the papers, and I expect Tolani has dropped him a line too. When you get back home, you'll find your position in the salon is much higher, you know. After this, Madame is sure to let you go out to all the charity balls and big parties and such next winter. Wearing the newest clothes, naturally. And when you reach that stage your salary is bigger too."

"I've really only been on probation, haven't I?" Jenni said. "Now I can graduate so to speak."

"Exactly, darling. Clever of you to realise it at last. Ah, here's Gina! I want you to press my amber skirt again for the morning, Gina . . ."

The Club dell 'Orologio was extremely gay and smart. It had been created in some ancient cellars not far from the Rialto, decorated in startling fashion with clocks of all shapes and sizes all over its deep purple walls. Jenni and

Sophia sat at a table with two Italian men to whom Miss Tozi had introduced them. One was a member of the Fashion Month committee, the other his visiting cousin from Naples. "Prince Vittore Mergelena," Miss Tozi had said.

Jenni got up to dance with him to the music of the steel band. He was dark and well-built and his neat moustache looked as if it had been ironed on his face. He held her firmly, leaving no doubt he was appreciating her proximity. Despite his rather stilted English, he still managed to produce a stream of compliments as they moved round the densely-packed purple glass floor. Jenni felt she ought to be extremely thrilled. Here she was, little Jennifer Kate Wells from a Somerset village among the fields, who had never even worn perfume or tasted champagne until she came to London six months ago. Now she danced with a Prince of Savoia. He was gazing at her ardently, suggesting she took a holiday in the south when she left Venice so he might have the pleasure of showing her his vineyards and his castello. If only her mind would not keep on returning so persistently to Martin Heywood!

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS WEDNESDAY afternoon at the Palazzo Tolani. The long mirror-lined room which had been given over to the models was a hot, seething hive of activity. The noise was deafening as the girls chattered and squealed and argued in a dozen languages. Their maids who were helping them to dress added to the volume, hardly even muffled by the clothes which hung, neatly ticketed, on the long wooden racks. All the dresses were carefully preserved inside enormous plastic bags so that nobody should learn their secrets until they were actually put on. Shoes were stacked in rows and bags and gloves set out on tables, and make-up boxes were everywhere. One Spanish girl clasped a garnet bandeaux between her teeth. It was evidently valuable and she was determined not to allow it out of her sight as she dressed.

Jenni's head was reeling in the unaccustomed atmosphere. She had thought it bad enough in the dressing-room at The House of Donne when all his six models were preparing for a showing at once, but this was sheer nerve-racking pandemonium. She was tense and keyed up in any case, a little scared of what the next few hours would bring, wondering if she could indeed provide the outstanding success of the day in *Venetian Dusk*. Signor Foscari had taken great pains with her solo performance, arranging music and lighting with infinite care.

"No doubt Count Tolani has told him how Miss Jenni from London is so important," one of the French girls had remarked at the final rehearsal. She had carefully raised her voice to be loud enough for Jenni to hear. Arni had laughed and supplemented: "Is that such honour? I am told he has a different favourite every season. Perhaps it amuses him to take a girl who is only a house-model and try to teach her sufficiently for these big international showings."

Jenni knew she had a lot to learn as yet, acquiring the flair and detailed knowledge which only experience could bring. She took comfort in reflecting that the Count was convinced of her ability otherwise he would not be troubling like this. He had sent her flowers to the Zucci that morning. Gina had laid them down on the table, a great sheaf of red roses and yellow irises, with a saucily knowing smile.

"Tolani is running true to form," Sophia had remarked later. "He's certainly enraptured with you, Jenni. You'll probably be offered a piece of jewellery tonight. A diamond bracelet I shouldn't wonder."

"But I can't accept anything like that from him, can I?"

"That's up to you, darling! Tolani is a rich man. Just remember a bit of sparkle doesn't mean any more to him financially speaking than giving you a box of chocolates."

He was enormously wealthy, Jenni knew. This magnificent palace indicated that, and he also had a villa in Rome and one on the seashore. His fashion empire was a lucrative undertaking as well. He seemed to find great pleasure in ruling it, employing his restless energy and superb diplomatic charm. Jenni had watched him considering a parade of models with the slightly narrowed critical eyes of the professional connoisseur. When he talked to the signor his words were sharply practical and to the point. There was no doubt he intended this showing to be the greatest sensation of the whole Fashion Month, both socially and com-

mercially. As Sophia had observed: "The invitation list reads like a page from Debrett and another from the same book in every European country! With a few film stars and transatlantic millionaires thrown in for luck."

The Count was outside now, standing at the head of his white marble staircase, greeting the guests as they arrived. Carlotta di Falissimo stood beside him, acting as his hostess. She was draped in pink chiffon which made a perfect background for her magnificent rubies. As Jenni sat there putting on her eye-shadow, she could hear the sounds of the assembly in the distance. The laughter and the chatter and the rustling which always preceded a showing.

She knew she was becoming increasingly nervous. So much devolved on her today and she was unaccustomed to heavy responsibilities. Suppose she tripped on the steps or walked one pace too many at the far end of the carpet or forgot to turn with the graceful half-swaying half-curtsy movement the signor had prescribed. Her throat felt strangely dry and her heart began to thump unevenly as the hands of the big clock moved inexorably towards five.

Several other girls were due to make their appearance before Jenni. Now they began to put on their gowns, opening the plastic bags watched by a score of shrewdly-assessing eyes. Arni produced a superbly-cut white satin gown covered with silver embroidery. When she had arranged it round her tall statuesque figure she looked like a snow-queen. As she came to stand near Jenni for a moment, adjusting a glittering diamond band across her yellow hair, she made the younger girl feel oddly insignificant. Could *Venetian Dusk* with its subtle colourings and gentle drape stand up to the dramatic effect of a shimmering gown like this? Jenni felt almost fearful as she opened her bag in turn and handed her dress to Gina. Arni's eyes swept over it as did a dozen others but her face remained expressionless.

She went on arranging her jewellery, still staying close to Jenni's chair.

Jane and Carol walked out in turn and came back again. Two French girls followed them, moving with haughty aloofness. Then Arni went to stand just inside the dressing-room door, ready to appear at the entrance to the library when the signor raised his hand. He was the master of ceremonies and each model took her cue from him like a singer from the conductor of the orchestra.

Jenni was wearing her gown now, studying its line as the soft fabric caressed her slender waist and hips then fell to cover her feet. It seemed everything it should be but the feeling of uncertainty still pervaded her mind.

"I'm getting horribly scared," she murmured in Sophia's ear as her friend came across for a moment. "It's this fierce competition and jealousy, I suppose."

"Don't let it get you down," Sophia hissed back seizing another lipstick. "You're unique, Jenni. You've got a quality none of them have."

Gina had just laid down the sumptuous white fox stole which Jenni was to toss round her shoulders as she walked out, letting it fall away a little later and trail negligently down behind her before she turned. Sophia moved the fur aside in order to get to the mirror again. There was a flash of white and an outstretched arm. The stole was whisked away and Arni was flinging it calmly round her neck as she walked out of the room. Jenni seeing her cried out in horror.

"Oh, stop her! She's taken my fur! Stop her somebody!"

It was too late. Arni was already entering the library, a glittering ivory and silver pillar, the Arctic fox completing the picture exquisitely. Several of the other models stared almost unbelievably and for a moment the noise in the dressing-room was actually stilled. Then it broke out again in even greater volume.

"How wicked!" . . . "Those Swedish hunks are all the same, I guess!" . . . "*Pauvre Mademoiselle Jenni.*" . . . "To treat her so." . . . "*Un errore.*" "*Ah, signorina.*"

Jenni began to tremble. Desperately she turned to Sophia and caught hold of her hands. In the distance they could hear the applause and the polite cries of 'Brava' and 'Charming' as Arni walked along the red carpet between the rows of gilt chairs.

"How could she?" Jenni asked. "She's ruined everything for me now. I can't go on—that stole is part of the ensemble. Mr. Erik said so."

"Don't you dare to get hysterical!" Sophia commanded. "You've got to go on no matter what. Pull yourself together. Walk out there with your faint smile as if nothing had happened . . . Go on, Jenni. The signor is beckoning you . . . Go on, I say!"

She gave Jenni a determined little push and the girl automatically left the dressing-room and took the few intervening steps to the library doors. As Arni reached the end of the red carpet on her return journey, Jenni would step on to it in turn. Jenni looked at the Swedish blonde, her long limbs moving quite slowly with an assumed dignity, the white fur loosely over one bare shoulder now. Something happened to the English girl at the sight of that calm arrogance. All her nervousness vanished like mist in the sunshine. In its place she knew a furious anger that Arni should presume to treat her so.

As Arni reached the end of the carpet, Jenni stepped out, several brief seconds too early so that she brushed against the Swede.

Swiftly she shot out her hand and pulled the stole off, in one sharp movement which took Arni aback so that she offered no resistance. There was a murmur of surprise, a half-smothered giggle, as Jenni lifted the fur to her own neck, wearing it as Erik Donne had originally decreed.

Then she was off among the guests on the narrow red strip, conscious of a muffled word and a stumbling in her rear. But even if Arni had completely overbalanced Jenni did not care. Her eyes bright, the faintest touch of rosy excitement tingeing her cheeks, she swung the lovely skirts of *Venetian Dusk* on their appointed way. All at once she seemed to be drawing a vivid brand of courage from the atmosphere.

When she came to make her turn, Jenni ignored one of the elementary rules of modelling. She knew the Count was sitting at this end of the chairs so instead of keeping her vaguely-smiling gaze focused above the guests heads, she lowered her eyes and deliberately smiled at him. Enchantingly, mischievously, as though inviting him to share the exhilarating fun of what she had just done to Arni. Telling him she was a personality too who could retrieve her poise in a baffling situation and even turn it to light-hearted amusement. She thought his dark eyes gleamed back in quick response before she swayed prettily, slowly, half curtsying in time to the dreamy waltz music, and walked back again to the library doors.

As she went Jenni heard the applause, the mixture of soft excited chatter and gentle laughter which unmistakably pronounced success. Then Sophia came out and gave her the merest suspicion of a wink before she glided on to the red carpet for her parade between the chairs. Jenni exhaled a long breath as she returned to the dressing-room. She had passed her test. She had not let Mr. Erik down after all. She looked across at Arni who was patting her hair at the other end of the room and gave her a cold supercilious stare. Even as she did it, Jenni was amazed at her own serene capability. It was just as though she had been given some magical injection.

"Miss Tozi has made a note of it, Jenni," Gabrielle said. "She will report to the committee later. It is not right—

against the strictest law—to take another model's clothes. Mademoiselle Arni will be made to offer the apology. You see!"

"All I ask is that she keeps out of my way in future," Jenni declared.

Sophia returned and gave Jenni a quick squeeze.

"Congratulations, dear," she said, "you were fine. Now I know you've got what it takes."

Swiftly they were putting evening coats over their gowns, ready to parade once more, first alone and then in groups with the other girls like movements of a ballet. As the music swelled to its final crescendo, they all curtsied low to the audience, a garden of lovely swaying flowers, colourful and exotic. Then one by one to the accompaniment of the applause, they drifted out through the library doors. The showing was over.

As Jenni started to change, she could hear the sounds of chairs being moved and the chatter and laughter as the guests went through into the salon beyond where the champagne buffet was waiting for them. Miss Tozi and Signor Foscari appeared at the dressing-room door, to beam at the models and tell them they were invited to join the guests as soon as they were ready.

"Good!" Jenni laughed to Sophia, "I can certainly use a drink after this!"

She was exultant now, and suddenly it seemed the most heavenly nerve-tingling sensation in the world to be alive and successful. The warm red of the silk afternoon dress she put on seemed to reflect her mood appropriately. Still happy, she walked along with Carol and Jane and Sophia into the crowded buffet salon. The Count himself came to bring them glasses of champagne.

"You were sensational," he murmured to Jenni. "The talk there is about you—but we will discuss it later when we are alone. Ah, Carlotta! Here you are—Miss Jenni,

my sister wishes to present you to the ladies who have been admiring your London gown."

Carlotta di Falissimo smiled at Jenni graciously, perhaps a trifle condescendingly, too, as they moved on.

"Yes, that was a ravishing dress," she remarked. "Such a delicately intriguing shade—*Venetian Dusk* indeed. I am longing to have it for myself."

Jenni had learnt at the House of Donne you must always pretend you are doing a prospective customer a great favour by allowing her to buy. Even though Mr. Erik would undoubtedly be pleased to add the Duchesa to that list of distinguished women who received his statements of account twice a year. So Jenni inclined her head and said carefully:

"That tone of blue would be perfect for your skin, Duchesa. And if you really do feel attracted by the gown, probably Mr. Erik could be persuaded to copy it to your measurements. The Count is such an excellent friend of his, of course."

"And an excellent friend of Miss Jenni, also, one understands."

The girl's eyes widened.

"Count Tolani has been most kind to me," she answered quietly. "It's been wonderful to see Venice for the first time with such a knowledgeable guide."

"Mario is very jealous of the prestige of our city," the Duchesa said smoothly. "The Tolanis are an ancient Venetian family, Miss Jenni. We are a proud one, too."

Instead of joining one of the groups around the buffet, they were standing alone, a little apart, as though the Duchesa wished their conversation to be private.

"Have you been a model long?" she enquired of Jenni. "No? . . . Ah, from Somerset. That is a pastoral district, is it not? Perhaps your parents keep a farm? Are they still living?"

"No, they're both dead," Jenni replied. "I was brought up by my aunt. She's a widow."

"An aristocrat. A titled woman one assumes?"

Jenni shook her head.

"No. Just plain Mrs. Angela Wells."

"But it is an old family yours?" the Italian persisted.

"Of long establishment in Somerset?"

"Oh, we're quite respectable, I assure you," Jenni smiled.

"You wanted to present me to some of the guests, I believe?"

She moved towards the buffet and the Duchesa had to follow. Jenni did not understand why she was being examined like this but she resented the imperious tone and in her new-found confidence, she determined not to submit. If the Duchesa objected to her brother being friendly, she had much better say so forthrightly. Anyway, it was surely no business of hers how Count Tolani spent his time.

An hour later the guests were descending the marble staircase to the flower-decked quay at the end of the hall-courtyard where their gondolas and launches waited for them. Jenni went back to the models' dressing-room, finding herself alone there now for even Gina had left with Sophia. She sat down wondering what exactly she was supposed to do. Since she was dining with the Count presumably he would send her a message or come to collect her himself as soon as the last guest had departed. Carefully Jenni put on *Venetian Dusk* again and retouched her make-up. Then she sat with the blue folds swirling gracefully about her silver-shod feet until an enquiring knock came at the door. Jenni called "Come in," and Signor Foscari appeared.

"Ah, so you are ready, Miss Jenni," he smiled. "I regret most deeply if I have kept you waiting. There were so many ladies and gentlemen to leave. Count Tolani has asked me to show you the various rooms of the palazzo.

Shall we inspect them so? . . . There are some magnificent decorations to be seen. Observe the painted ceiling in this circular salon by Saramencenti. It shows the Queen of Heaven surrounded by her cherubs."

He led Jenni away, talking easily. They passed through stately apartments still with the same rich furnishings and bronzes and statues and tapestries, the breathtaking murals, the glowing mosaics that had filled them for generations. "Though the marble floors are not so good for the feet, eh?" the signor chuckled.

Then they traversed a long corridor hung with red silk and the signor opened the door of a small room with painted walls and gilded furniture. A table set for dinner stood in the centre of the Oriental carpet. The signor motioned Jenni to precede him inside and as she stepped over the threshold, the door closed softly behind her. Smilingly Count Tolani came into the room from the balcony outside.

"At last, Jenni!" he said, taking her hand and looking at it for a moment. Then tenderly he raised it to his lips, pressing them against her soft palm. It was a curiously sensuous little gesture, more intimate than anything which he had used towards her before.

"I am sorry you had to inspect so much art," he said, "but I did not wish unkind eyes to see us meeting again now. There is more than enough scandal in Venice already. Gossip is the favourite pastime of so many people here, alas."

"Perhaps they haven't enough useful occupation," Jenni suggested. "But I loved looking round though. It's all so sensationally beautiful. I've never been in a home with such a romantic atmosphere before."

"The palazzo has belonged to my family for eight generations," he told her, "and witnessed many scenes of violence and bloodshed in the past. Nowadays, of course, it only sees

nice things happening within its walls. Such as the visit of the adorable Jenni this evening."

They talked for a little while, sitting on the balcony behind a screen of roses and vines, then came inside to dinner. A manservant waited on them, silent-footed and discreet. The Count talked amusingly, incidentally mentioning the episode of the fur. "That was clever, Jenni. She is jealous of you, of course. You are younger and far more lovely than she is and you have been the success of the Fashion Month without doubt."

It gave Jenni a warm, pleasantly egotistical feeling that this charming man should be entertaining her like this, his admiration so evident, his one desire to make her understand how supremely attractive she was in his eyes. His dark mobile face was certainly the most good-looking she had ever seen before. As she watched him drinking champagne it seemed the obvious wine, so suited to his own personality with its air of luxury and sophisticated gaiety. To be here in this superb little room was a dream of glamour and romance come true. As Mario caught her glance, he raised his glass with his inimitable smile.

Presently it was time to return to the balcony and sit there in the long low chairs to watch the '*galleggente*' sail past. It was a floating platform with singers and musicians under a cupola blazing with lights, supported by illuminated columns in red and green and blue. Slowly, gracefully it glided along the canal escorted by dozens of decorated gondolas massed with flowers and merry dummy figures, Chinese lanterns bobbing up and down at the prows. The procession seemed to be moving along on waves of music, through the black, gold-streaked waters by the tall old houses and the palazzos. Jenni felt herself caught up by the sheer poetry and glorious disturbing sound of it all. She stood as the procession began to vanish round the bend of the canal, leaning over the balcony to watch it to the last.

When she turned again with a little sigh, Mario was standing by her side. His hands took hold of her, eager and possessive, to draw her into his arms.

"*Madonna mia!*" he murmured and kissed her. Jenni did not resist him. It seemed the natural complement to this beautiful, utterly enchanting moment of the night. His lips were light, caressing, almost enquiring. Then half-leading, half-carrying her, he took her inside again and drew her down beside him on the big white couch. It was broad and low and its soft cushions received her body as an embrace. Jenni uttered a quivering little sigh. She felt slightly dazed, as though she was moving through a dream in the misty hour between darkness and dawn. The lamps in the room had grown very pale and low, the light a faint amber glimmer in the midst of the pools of shadow.

She found her head was pillowed against him, her hair a dark red cloud on the whiteness of his dinner-jacket.

"Don't be stiff, my Jenni," he whispered. "Your throat is so hard and taut. Relax a little. There is nothing to be afraid of."

His fingers were stroking her hair now, touching her cheeks, slipping down her soft flesh to explore her shoulders.

"You're exquisite," he murmured. "My English love, all sweetly gentle like a rose in bud. Let me kiss you again."

Her mouth responded to his instinctively, surrendering because it seemed inevitable. The kiss was warm and lingering, its power increasing as Mario's ardour mounted. Now his mouth was crushed against hers almost as though he would inflame her with his own hot passions, brand her with his impetuous fire. His arms became tighter, holding her against him in fiercely triumphant possession. Jenni lay uncomplaining and acquiescent, dimly aware that something wonderful was happening to her. This then was love, the magic and the miracle of it.

"Jenni!" he said, his voice low and insistently compelling, "say you are mine, Jenni. Tell me so."

His face was against hers as he pressed her yielding body back to the cushions so there was room for them to lie side by side. Jenni was completely limp, accepting his hands and his words because she seemed to have no will or spirit left other than to obey him. She wanted to give herself up to him. Because this was her supreme moment, the dawning of that love she had imagined so often. She had known these dreams in her sleep, unconsciously conjuring up the wishful images of her womanhood in the still night hours and waking to feel a sense of frustration because the ecstasy was still but something imagined. Now the true reality had arrived. She was approaching the pinnacle, here with Mario Tolani, her head against his heart, his hand imprisoning her waist while his desirous mouth went over her face to come hungrily back to her lips again. Mario loved her. He could surely never have loved any other girl like this before.

"I love you, Jenni. Do you love me too? . . . I am burning for you. I cannot wait any longer . . ."

Because the hot sweetness was almost too much to be borne, Jenni closed her eyes and let the moment encompass her. For a few minutes she lay there suspended, her blood flowing swiftly, her pulses throbbing and trembling. Everything else was forgotten. Time stood still, its light and its face motionless and hidden. She waited conscious of nothing but the man whose breath was mingling with her own as his kisses demanded everything she had to give.

Suddenly she heard a loud insistent knocking. It went on and on, shattering the cocoon of sensuous emotion in which she was imprisoned, his hands falling away from her. He uttered a furious imprecation then he swung his legs over the side of the couch to the floor and walked across the room. Dimly Jenni realised he was listening at the door.

"It is my sister," he said. "Why she comes now I cannot understand."

He raised his voice, speaking rapidly in Italian and Jenni could distinguish the Duchesa's tones as they replied through the richly-gilded panels. The girl sat up at the sound, smoothing her blue skirts out, touching her hair automatically. She still felt as though she was in a golden daze but her mind was clearing a little and she knew Carlotta di Falissimo had deliberately chosen to interrupt them now.

"Ah, bah!" Mario exclaimed and turned the key in the door. Carlotta walked into the room with a swirl of pink chiffon, her features hard, slant-eyed and contemptuous. She threw a single glance at the girl on the couch then turned all her attention to her brother. Her words were rapid and plainly angry and Mario made no secret of his reaction to them. They shouted and gesticulated, hands flung out so that the lamplight glinted on Carlotta's jewelled rings, engaging in voluble battle. Jenni could not understand a word but she sensed quite unmistakably that Carlotta was complaining about her presence alone with Mario late at night like this.

Suddenly Mario turned to her, his face darkly clouded.

"My sister chooses to interfere in my affairs," he explained. "It causes me much embarrassment and I can only apologise for her unseemly behaviour."

"I am acquainted with the precepts of good conduct," the Duchesa said also in English. "So as your hostess, I shall remain here until Miss Jenni decides to return to her hotel. It is not proper a young girl should be alone with you unchaperoned."

She sat down on the sofa beside Jenni.

"Be good enough to ring, Mario," she added. "We will have coffee and wine before Miss Jenni leaves us. I shall accompany her to her gondola myself. Ah, here is Gio-

vanni! You have already met my husband, of course," she said to the girl.

The Duc di Falissimo bowed to Jenni politely. He was a small man with pale eyes, balding and insignificant despite his great wealth and ancient name. The Count glanced at him sharply then back at his sister again.

"I would remind you, Carlotta," he observed, "that I am the master of this house. It is not for you to dictate to me like this."

The white shoulders lifted for a moment, so that the light glinted on the diamonds round the Duchesa's throat.

"I only recommend," she answered smoothly. "I do not wish our mother to be disturbed by unhappy tales."

"And who would tell them, pray?" the Count demanded.

"Servants no doubt. They always gossip."

Completely in command of the situation, she turned to Jenni again.

"You enjoyed the galleggente?" she asked in her normal silver tones. "The chief singer tonight was our celebrated tenor Laventi. Every season he appears at La Scala in Milan. It is a great experience to hear him there. Such bel canto! Are you fond of opera, Miss Jenni, Perhaps you attend at Covent Garden?"

"I have been there—yes."

The Duchessa nodded graciously and continued her impersonal chatter. She drew brief responses from Mario with direct questions and occasional remarks from her husband. Jenni sat wondering if she had just exchanged one dream for another much less agreeable. It seemed incredible this porcelain-cold little woman being so socially decorous could have been gesticulating so angrily and talking to her brother so vehemently only a few minutes earlier. Now Carlotta di Falissimo was behaving as any hostess and Jenni felt confused and oddly irritated. She had been jerked out of her

golden haze too rapidly and now reaction was setting in.

Coffee came and when Jenni had drunk some, she felt better again, her head much clearer and steadier. Looking up she met Mario's eyes regarding her. Ruefully, intimately and with tenderness, he smiled across and it was as though they already shared a delicate secret between them. When Jenni rose to leave, he took her hand in his for a moment, murmuring his regrets to see her go. Jenni knew the gesture was not being wasted on his sister either.

Jenni went to get her stole and the Duchesa accompanied her. As the girl stood in front of the mirror retouching her lips she saw the older woman's face reflected beside her own. The brown eyes under the decisive brows, the finely-chiselled features with the small patrician nose. The enamel-smooth make-up and the rather-too-thin red lips. Carlotta di Falissimo would never yield generously or consider anybody except herself.

"Are you all right now, Miss Jenni?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you. Why shouldn't I be?"

"I wondered if you had taken too much wine," came the answer. "Mario usually plies his girls with champagne first. I suppose he thinks it dissolves their inhibitions."

Jenni's self-control began to slip.

"That's a hateful thing to say, Duchesa," she retorted. "I don't feel the Count would really stoop to such cheap tricks anyway."

"No? You think I lie? Only because you wish to believe it, of course. Not that he needs to do so in every case. With some it is not necessary. After all, Mario is a most handsome man as well as an experienced lover."

Jenni observed coldly. "You can't have much affection for your brother to speak about him like this."

"We understand each other," the Duchesa said. "It is always the same at these big fashion events unfortunately. Another model girl to be flattered and charmed for a little

while. One grows weary of watching. And there is inevitably some gossip which I find distasteful. Mario even forgets to be discreet at times."

Jenni did not trust herself to say any more. Her head tilted high, she walked out of the room and back to the entrance hall where Mario and the Duc were standing. As though she was the centre figure in a showing, Jenni swung her long blue cloud of skirts over the marble floor and down the steps to where the gondola waited. Ignoring the hands the two men stretched out to help her, she stepped lightly down and settled herself back under the hood. Then she bowed towards the group on the steps.

Mario was looking at her pleadingly and Jenni fancied he spoke though she could not catch his actual words. The Duc's sallow face was vaguely expressionless. His wife moved forward and bent to Jenni.

"Why do you not ask Miss Tozi?" she murmured. "Tozi has been hostess for the models on many occasions. Good night, Miss Jenni. *Arrivederci.*"

Jenni sat rigid as the gondolier poled away. Presently he began to sing to her because she was young and beautiful. She gave him an extra coin when they reached the hotel quay but his tribute had not soothed her in the least. She still felt angry and resentful at the way the Duchesa had treated her. How dared she presume to speak like that! Mario had carried off the situation with complete dignity, refraining from arguing with his sister after that initial battle. Jenni knew he was as disappointed as she was herself at this anti-climax to their evening. Her heart warmed again at the thought of him. How tightly his arms had clasped and held her while his voice quivered so passionately as he leant over her on the couch. He loved her. There could be no doubt of that, no matter what the Duchesa chose to insinuate. What if there had been other girls in the past? It was Jenni he adored and wanted now and she felt

sure it would not be long before he sought her again.

When Jenni reached their room she found Sophia fast asleep, so she tiptoed about and got into bed very quietly. In a few minutes she was dreaming, imagining that Mario's hands were holding her pinioned once more while his lips came hotly to hers. She woke in the morning with a sense of expectancy. Today Mario was sure to communicate with her in some way or other. For a few moments she lay drowsily watching the sunlight creeping under the shutters. Then she heard Sophia begin to stir. She turned her head and looked at the other bed.

"Good morning, Sophia. How are you?"

"Mmmmm . . . Oh, 'morning, darling." Sophia struggled up from the pillows, stretching her arms wide. "Heavens, I'm still appallingly tired. What time did you get back last night?"

"Just after one o'clock."

"Early for Venice. And I suppose you're fresh as a daisy at that. Well, how did it go? Or should I be tactful and mind my own business?"

"I've nothing to hide," Jenni declared. "I had dinner alone with Mario in a little salon and then we went out on to the balcony to watch the musical procession pass by. After that, the Duchesa and her husband came into the room and we all sat together until I left."

"No!" Sophia exclaimed. "However did Tolani allow that? I mean, he's such a skilful wooer or at least reputed to be."

"I don't think he'd any option," Jenni said. "After all she's his sister and staying in the palazzo just now, isn't she?"

"I should still have thought he could have organised things better," Sophia remarked. "So it was really only a polite social evening in the end?"

"Something like that," Jenni agreed. "He's a wonderful

person though. So confident and sophisticated. He seems to know about everything."

"Especially women. You sound as though you enjoyed yourself just the same."

"It was unusual," Jenni prevaricated. "Seeing over the palazzo too. All that richness and luxury and atmosphere."

"You didn't meet Mamma, I suppose? The old Contessa."

"No. She was mentioned once though. Is there some dark mystery about her?"

"Well, nobody ever sees her," Sophia replied. "She keeps to her private rooms and Carlotta is always the hostess. You might ask Tolani some time. I'd adore to know why she never appears. Merely to satisfy my curiosity. What did you wear for the dinner?"

"*Venetian Dusk* naturally. It's probably got a bit creased too. I must ask Gina to press it when she comes. What are we going to do this morning, by the way? We're free until lunch, aren't we?"

"So Tozi says. The hairdresser first and after that we might ramble around and do a bit of shopping. I want to buy a few odd souvenirs to take home."

"Yes, I'd love a pair of those silver ear-rings," Jenni said, "and I must get something for Aunt Angela and David and for Miss MacFadden."

Gina arrived and soon the girls were drinking their coffee and eating their fruit and rolls. Presently they went downstairs and reported to Miss Tozi, discussing the day's plans, then went off to the hairdresser's salon for an hour. When they returned to their room to collect their outdoor things, a wave of perfume greeted them. Roses were massed all over the dressing-table and the desk, dark red velvet-petalled blooms.

"A token from Tolani, I fancy," Sophia remarked. "Ah, there's the note—yes, it's addressed to you, darling."

Jenni tore the square white envelope open.

There will be other nights, beloved, Mario had written, *I adore you for ever.*

Smiling, Jenni slipped the card into the pocket of her grey printed dress while Sophia raised her eyebrows.

"Oh-ho! So it's like that. But you're definitely enamoured of the man now."

"I won't contradict you, Sophia."

"You couldn't, my sweet," Sophia laughed, "you're too transparent. Still so long as you don't lose your head or your sense of proportion, you'll find it an interesting experience. You've won a great personal success in Venice, Jenni. You must realise that."

"Yes. But it's nice to hear somebody else telling me so, too."

"You've got a great future as a model," Sophia assured her. "And Tolani can be useful to your career. I daresay Mr. Erik will choose you for the next New York trip now and after a girl receives an accolade like that, the sky's the limit for her. As I explained to your glass-blowing boy friend last night."

"Martin!" Jenni exclaimed. She was changing the contents of her bag, her sun-glasses and headscarf in one hand as she swung round. "You mean you've seen him then? Were you out with him last night or something?"

"As if I'd trouble," Sophia declared. "No, dear. He accosted me in the foyer as I came home and demanded to know where you were. Said he'd been ringing you without any answer. So I told him just where you were at that."

"You did. And what did Martin say?"

"He took it philosophically," Sophia answered. "What else could he do? He'll go and find himself another girl if he's any sense. You're not for the likes of Martin Heywood. Have you got everything now?"

"Yes. I think so."

“Let’s walk along that quaint little alleyway across the square. We can take our time because we aren’t meeting Carol and Jane at the coffee-bar until twelve. I noticed the most delectable antique shop near the gondola-station the other morning, too.”

Jenni put on her glasses and followed Sophia out. So she wasn’t likely to see Martin again now. He was intelligent enough to appreciate the truth of what Sophia had told him with her characteristic directness. Jenni gave a little sigh. Martin was so nice she would have liked to talk to him herself once more but probably it was better this way. She had no room for any other escort in Venice except Mario. As she thought about him she felt the warm glow in her heart, remembering how he loved her and how instinctively she responded to him. Laughing she ran down the hotel steps into the busy little square and gave herself up to all the fun and entertainment of another day in this magical city on the rippling water.

CHAPTER SIX

SUNSHINE BEAT DOWN on the Lido. It made the palatial white luxury hotels with their terraces and flower-boxes gleam even more pristine than ever. It sent hundreds of beach-loungers into the shade of their gaily-striped cabins though some were determined enough to stay on the sand and acquire still deeper shades of mahogany tan. There was no respite from the hot glow at the bathing pool where the fashion parade was taking place. The spectators sat comfortably under awnings but the models had to walk the entire length of the turquoise tiles which bordered the water, go up to the diving-platform, turn round and descend and walk back again. Jenni was only dressed in a scanty gingham playsuit and straw sandals but she felt as if she was being slowly grilled as she made her appearance. There seemed to be no air or breeze at all. Just the sticky sunbaked humidity everywhere around.

Gabrielle walked immediately after Jenni, carrying a huge orange beach-ball. She flung it down as the girls reached the dressing-room again, exclaiming dramatically :

"This is too cruel. One cannot continue in such conditions. My toes are balls of fire. I complain to Mademoiselle Tozi at once."

She did so volubly while the little hostess tried to soothe her. Yvonne joined in, adding to the tale of woe, while

Jenni drank the lemonade Gina handed her then reluctantly changed into a brief white swimsuit.

"This heat is most unseasonable," Miss Tozi was agreeing. "But have courage a little longer. As soon as the show is over, you can all go into the pool and enjoy yourselves."

An hour later Jenni was splashing blissfully. Several admiring Italian men were in close attendance but she was quite unconscious of them, completely absorbed in the sheer physical pleasure of the water against her skin. Sophia had made sure she used plenty of protective lotion first. "You must not, repeat not, get tanned, Jenni. The pale look is essential." But for the moment Jenni had forgotten about that and everything else.

Life was highly satisfying now. Mr. Erik had rung up to receive the latest news of the Fashion Month and congratulated Jenni on the reception she had been given in Venice.

"I have decided you shall be a full model when you get back," he had announced graciously. "You will show for me when the Princesses attend." There was a handsome increase in salary too. "You can afford a flat of your own now," Sophia had remarked when she heard. "After all, if you're going to have a proper social life this summer, your present place is hardly right, darling."

Jenni had sighed blissfully. No more acting as the 'house' model, the girl on whom the fabrics were pinned and draped, who must stand patiently while fitters pulled and argued and discussed the myriad details. She would go to Paris with Anne and Eleanor, and have her name printed in full under the fashion magazine photographs for which she posed. It had happened so quickly, Jenni still could not believe it.

Mario was being the most devoted swain. Flowers were constantly arriving at the Zucci. "It's like sleeping in the garden," Sophia declared. He had sent a wonderful gift of

perfume too. The flagon itself was of expensive glass shading from amber to deep green with the stopper carved in the shape of a lotus. Yesterday there had been a pink enamel and gold powder-compact with her initial on it. He had placed the little box tenderly into her hands as they sat together after the grand reception at the Ducal Palace. Jenni was leaning back in her richly-gilded chair surveying the glittering scene over which two enormous white marble statues of Mars and Apollo presided with lofty indifference.

"A trifle—a souvenir," Mario had said, "so that you do not forget me whilst I am gone."

"Why, where are you going?" Jenni had asked.

"To Milan," he answered. "Important business calls me and I cannot ignore it, alas! So for three days I shall not have the joy of seeing you, my beautiful Jenni. But all the time I shall be thinking of you and eagerly anticipating my return to Venice. Next week we will dine together again as we did before, but Carlotta will not disturb us on this occasion."

His dark eyes had told her what he could not say in such a public place and Jenni had smiled back. Before she could answer properly, the Duchesa was with them once more. She had been sitting on an adjacent chair and only left her brother and Jenni for a few minutes. Ever since that night at the Palazzo Tolani, Mario's sister had contrived to be there close to him at the fashion events. When he greeted Jenni she was close behind, holding out a beaming hand with a flashing smile. If she did turn away, the Duc seemed to materialise almost at once, courteously vague and utterly colourless but deaf to every hint that he might leave his brother-in-law alone. Jenni was covertly amused at the way Mario treated the other man. Smiling enigmatically, he raised no protest but oddly enough the Duc always got the last seat in the row from which he could barely see the parade or was overlooked in the groups arranged for photo-

graphers or forgotten by the waiters serving champagne and other refreshments.

Several times Mario had telephoned her at the hotel late at night, speaking fondly, assuring her of his undying adoration. Once, as Jenni was standing hidden behind a bank of flowers, waiting for her turn to walk on to the stage, strong arms had seized her and Mario's lips were being laid passionately against her bare shoulder.

"I know I must not spoil your mouth now," he whispered, "but it's agony to resist the temptation."

All the other models talked openly about Mario's devotion. "He is quite infatuated," Gabrielle assured Jenni. "How lucky you are! Such a handsome man and so rich. It's seldom you get both of those things together!" They now took it for granted that Jenni would be escorted by Mario and sit next to him and generally have the leading place at all the functions and parties which continued apace. Only Arni twisted her lip and passed malicious comments, but Jenni did not allow them to spoil her rapturous moments. Since the episode of the fur an armed truce had existed between the Swedish model and the English ones. Arni was swimming close to them this afternoon, cleaving the waters of the lagoon with long powerful strokes but she did not attempt actually to join them.

Presently Jenni swam over to a raft and climbed on to it, sitting beside Sophia. Three sun-bronzed Italians promptly appeared to sit on the opposite side, gazing intently. Accustomed to this strange kind of admiration now, the girls ignored them. Suddenly Jenni experienced a sense of shock as Sophia remarked casually: "It's different from Sunday at home, isn't it? Next Sunday I'm driving down to Eastbourne to see my Aunt Charlotte."

"Next Sunday," Jenni echoed. "Of course. We shall be home again then. Oh, what a ghastly thought!"

"This is the third week of the Fashion Month, darling.

In case you've forgotten, the grand finale takes place on Friday night. Next morning we fly back to London and Mr. Erik."

"It seems incredible," Jenni said. "I feel as though I've been here for months. I shall hate to leave Venice, won't you?"

"Not particularly. It's been terribly hard work here and now this heat-wave on top of everything else. Give me New York and air-conditioning and those well-groomed generous men."

"I've grown to adore Venice," Jenni sighed.

"Or do you mean Tolani? Still, cheer up. He'll be over in London again soon. By the way, did you mention the Contessa to him before he left for Milan?"

Jenni nodded.

"Just as you suggested," she replied. "I ventured a few remarks about his mother but he just turned them aside. Carlotta never mentions her either, although I believe she lives there at the palazzo."

"Queer, isn't it," Sophia declared. "I wonder exactly what the mystery is. Another peculiar thing is the way Carlotta insists on chaperoning her brother this year. Apparently she's never behaved like that before."

"Goodness!" Jenni giggled. "Am I such a menace to Mario then? She does seem absolutely determined we shan't be left alone in public. He treats her very patiently I think. Between ourselves though, Mario is arranging another little dinner-party for the two of us and he swears Carlotta definitely won't be there on this occasion."

One of the Italian men came nearer and made some loudly complimentary comments to the girls. Sophia gave him a frigid glance which did not discourage him in the least. He merely smiled widely and continued to pour out his exaggerated compliments.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Sophia exclaimed crossly.

"Come along then, Jenni. Let's swim back to the shore and have ourselves citronades in the hotel enclosure where these nuisances can't pursue us."

Nothing loath, Jenni returned to the cool of the water. As she swam she thought happily how good it was to be nineteen and successful, and admired, and in love with handsome Mario Tolani. She always thrilled when he came to her side, responding to his caresses and that experienced charm. Jenni was intelligent enough to realise Mario must have paid attentions to many women in the past but that did not mean he wasn't sincerely in love with her now. It was a tribute that she should have been able to attract him like this, especially when most of the other models would have been only too delighted to have his escort. Arni for instance, who was openly jealous of Jenni now.

Love and kisses seemed simple and natural in Venice. The warm seductive air and the dreamy canals and the gentleness of the pink houses, the elegant spires and cupolas, the trailing creepers and the flowers reflected in the water, all combined into a heady mixture. It was something Venice did to you, a magic distilled from the moon perhaps. It insinuated itself into your blood so that you forgot everything else but the moment and the romance it might bring you.

As Jenni reached the shore, a young Italian and an older Frenchman surfaced with her. Turning her back on them, she wrapped herself in her big white towelling coat then started as she heard a familiar voice. It spoke rapidly in Italian and she knew it was commanding the men to go away.

"Hello, Martin," she said, wondering if she was glad or sorry to meet him again.

He stood there in front of her, grey eyes regarding her steadily. Firm and direct and bluntly uncompromising. So different from Mario's flashing charm which reached out to envelop you at once. How odd that their names should be

so similar too. She smiled at Martin and he smiled back, rather guardedly, as though he was still not certain of his reception.

"I've finally caught up with you," he said levelly. "It's been quite a chase at that. You seem just about the busiest girl in Venice."

"I'm not here for a holiday," Jenni reminded him. "There are showings every day, you know. Lots of other things I have to go to as well."

"I do know," Martin assured her. "I've rung you several times too but you never seem to be in. You haven't answered my letter either."

"What letter? I haven't received one from you. When did you post it?"

"I took it round to the Zucci personally," he explained. "I tipped the porter to take it straight up to your room. He came back and said you were out but he'd given it to your friend Signorina King so you'd be sure to get it."

Jenni wondered uneasily whether Sophia had taken matters into her own hands once again. She could only remark a trifle awkwardly: "How strange. Because I've never had your letter, Martin. Honestly I haven't," she amplified as she saw his expression. "I can't imagine what happened to it. I'll make enquiries tonight."

"All right, Jenni. I'll believe you. So long as you tell me you weren't trying to freeze me out."

"Of course I'm not," she answered, surprised at the vehemence with which she spoke, "why would I, Martin? I still keep my Bambi standing on the chest of drawers . . ." Why on earth was she telling him this? Only last week she had calmly made up her mind it was a waste of time to see Martin and had accepted Sophia's advice. Now she was ignoring all those sensible decisions and flying in the face of reason. Something she could not understand seemed to be forcing her to do it.

"That's what I wanted to hear," Martin smiled. "Come and have a drink on the terrace. I'd like to talk to you."

"I'd love to but I don't think I can," Jenni answered, "I have to change and then I'm supposed to go back to Venice with the other girls on the next launch."

"Catch the later one," he suggested. "There's a good service. Please, Jenni. There's such a lot I have to say to you."

"All right then," she surrendered. "I'll slip out of this suit and tell them—No, don't come with me, Martin. It's much better not. Just wait here for I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Promise cross your heart?"

"Cross my heart, Martin!"

As Jenni moved, he put out a hand to help her up the rough steps on to the boardwalk across the sand. At the same moment Arni appeared at the head. She had changed into a blue playsuit, her camera in her hand, two young Italians in close attendance. She stood directly in front of Jenni then pretended to stand aside, again with a deliberate gesture.

"So you have another sweetheart while Count Tolani is absent," she remarked. "An Englishman. How intriguing!"

"I don't see it's any business of yours," Jenni retorted sharply as she brushed past. She hurried along to where Sophia and Yvonne and Jane were sitting with an American reporter and some Italian TV camera-men.

"Just going to change," Jenni called across, "then I must—er, make an important telephone call."

"Ah! To Milan, perhaps?" Yvonne laughed.

"Don't be too long," Sophia said, "we're going to catch the next launch back. It goes in ten minutes."

"I shan't be ready," Jenni declared. "Don't wait for me. I can get a later boat."

Quickly she slipped into the cabine and changed into

her violet pants and the green and white silk shirt that went with them. Dark glasses, beach-bag and shady straw hat and she was on her way to join Martin again, slightly breathless and still with the definite sense of being foolish and short-sighted but quite unable to help it.

"There!" she exclaimed as they met again. "I wasn't long, was I?"

"Who's your Scandinavian friend?" Martin enquired. "The one you spoke to as you went up the steps just now. She insisted on taking my photograph."

"A Swedish model called Arni. We're not friends either. We get in each other's hair—Where are we going to have our drink? Not on the main terrace if you don't mind. All the other girls are still there and they do gossip so."

"I thought we might get away from the Lido for an hour or two," Martin said. "It's so crowded and noisy here. Not at all the place for quiet conversation."

"Remember I haven't a lot of time to spare," Jenni said. "Is there somewhere quite near?"

"Nacello. Half an hour in the boat." He took hold of her arm. "Come along. It's only the small quay here."

Jenni exclaimed as he handed her down into a smart red and white powercraft.

"Why, is this yours?" she asked.

"Yes. Hired for the day!"

"Oh, Martin! How extravagant. But it's nice though." She settled herself on the leather cushions and watched him take the wheel, his brown hands competent and firm. "You needn't be nervous," he remarked as the engine started to throb, "I'm used to boats. I've belonged to the Lancs Coast Sailing Club ever since I was a lad." The next minute they were speeding along the smooth waters of the lagoon, a mirror-like world unruffled by any wind. The Lido and its gay crowds receded into the distance behind them and vanished out of sight.

Nacello was one of the many remote little islands at the far side of the broad lagoon, dreaming gently in the late afternoon sunshine. It was a thin strip of land between water and sky with only a few people to be seen wandering near its cluster of low white houses, a church right at the edge of the sand like an old ship washed up on the beach ages ago. Jenni and Martin went into it to look at the famous Black Madonna, sauntering out again through the fruit trees in the priest's garden. They talked lightly and easily about everything under the sun and Jenni felt herself relaxing more than she had done for several days past. Not since she had been in Martin Heywood's company before, in fact. With him now she could forget the speeding moments and well-nigh everything else.

They went to have a cup of coffee at the trattoria by the inlet. There were a few rough wooden tables set out on the terrace underneath the vine-leaves so Jenni sat down and propped her chin in her cupped hands, gazing over the tranquil scene. She looked at the shabby houses with their pink roofs, at the soft green clumps of tea-plant, at the water lapping the foot of the terrace below her, at the moorhens walking delicately across the sand the tide had left behind.

"It's such an oasis of peace," she remarked happily, "right away from all the rest of the world."

"That's why we came," Martin answered. "So we can get things straightened out between us, Jenni."

"I didn't know they were crooked," she murmured, smiling at the wrinkled old woman who placed the crocks and the metal coffee-pot in front of them. "Shall I pour out or will you?"

"I'm serious, Jenni," Martin said as he took his coffee, "desperately serious. Last time we were together, I kissed you and you kissed me back. Which told me you liked me, to say the least of it."

"But of course I like you, Martin. Indeed I do."

"Then why have you been so elusive ever since?" he pressed her. "I had to stalk you for hours today before I could even speak to you. I wondered if it had anything to do with Count Tolani. Every time I see your photograph in the paper he seems to be there beside you with a proprietorial air."

"He's the chairman of the Fashion Month committee," Jenni pointed out. "Naturally he's always around on these occasions."

"Miss King intimated he took a special interest in you," Martin remarked. "Associating himself with your career was how she described it. What does that mean exactly, Jenni? Or have I no right to ask?"

Jenni said slowly: "So you've been discussing me with Sophia." She remembered now that her friend had told her about Martin's call but without much detail. "Just when was this?"

"One night when I came round to the Zucci to see if I could find you. But as usual you were out. Some of the model girls were in the lounge and the porter suggested I saw Miss King if I wanted to know where you were. He fetched her and we had a drink together in the American Bar and talked about you."

"I see. And did Sophia tell you I was Mario's sweetheart or what?"

Martin's dark brows drew together.

"Not in so many words," he answered. "She didn't really tell me anything. Just hinted and insinuated. She seemed to consider it was presumptuous on my part to be hanging round you anyway. Said I couldn't possibly be expected to understand the fashion business and what your job represented to a girl like you. She said you were ambitious to become a top star or whatever it's called and that Tolani was in a position to help you along."

"So he is," Jenni agreed. "I've had some success already

in Venice, you know. Mr. Erik—that's Erik Donne my boss in London—has promoted me this week. When I go back home, I shan't be just the junior house model any longer. I'll have much higher standing and a rise in salary and everything."

"But is that all you want from life, Jenni? Just to walk about wearing elaborate clothes and a lot of paint and powder, showing off to other women and posing for fancy photographs?"

A small breeze was rippling the water. It blew a few strands of Jenni's dark red hair on to her forehead. She smoothed them deftly back into place before she told him :

"There's far more to modelling successfully than that, Martin. Although I don't suppose a man could understand. Not a man like you, I mean. Since you're not connected with *haute couture*."

"I'm a stiff-necked outsider, in fact?"

"Oh, no! I didn't say that, Martin. It's simply that you belong to a different world from mine. I adore being a model. You work in lovely surroundings and meet exciting people all the time. Now I shall be sent to glamorous balls and West End premières and things like that, and there'll be lots of travel too. Paris and Rome and New York maybe. Why, Eleanor flew out to Hong Kong for a week last winter to pose for some special magazine pictures."

"I wish you weren't so enthusiastic," Martin said sombrely, "it's wrong."

"Why is it?" Jenni asked. "I don't see anything wrong about enjoying your work and being ambitious. I expect you feel much the same about your job. You intend to be a success in it, don't you? That's why you come to Venice to study the latest ideas in glass-making. You told me so that Sunday we spent together at the beach."

"It's not the same for a man," Martin frowned again. "Don't you ever think about marriage, for instance?"

"I hope I'll marry some day—yes. But I've simply acons of time yet, of course."

"Why of course?" he pressed her. "If you fell in love, what then?"

"I don't know," she owned. "I'll wait until it happens."

"Are you in love with Tolani?"

"I don't know," Jenni repeated, dropping her eyes and looking at the table top. "I like him enormously. He's really quite a sensational person. But I'm not sure yet—anyway, why are you cross-examining me this way, Martin? Can't we just sit back and enjoy the glorious evening?"

"I have to know how you feel about things, Jenni," he explained, "particularly about me. Because you see, I'm in love with you."

"Not deeply enough," Jenni said quickly. "I mean, you can't be. You've only met me three or four times."

"That doesn't make the slightest difference," Martin answered. "Love isn't something that goes by the clock. You can't reason it out either. You just know it's there."

"Do you?" she murmured.

"Yes. Why, as soon as I set eyes on you in that plane coming out my heart turned over. I thought you were the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I still do. I love you, Jenni. With every fibre of my being. Please believe that."

Jenni sat there caught up in a confusion of mixed and badly disturbed emotions. There was no mistaking the earnestness of Martin's voice. She moved her head and the sunlight filtering down between the vines wove a glistening pattern among her hair. Her lips quivered a little as she answered gently :

"Thank you, Martin. You make me feel terribly proud. But I'm not sure I ought to let you go on."

He smiled. "You couldn't stop me, Jenni. It would be like trying to turn back the sea or blot out the sun. Equally futile. I love you and I always shall."

"How can you be so sure?" she wondered.

"I am. Beyond all doubt. I've never paid much attention to girls before too. I've taken a few about naturally but there has never been one who really stirred me. Now I'm glad because I've found you at last. Everything I've ever dreamed about and longed for. Yes, my Jenni. You are my destined love. So naturally I want to marry you."

"But that's quite impossible," she said hastily.

"Is it? Why?"

"Why? Well, because—because—how can I explain, Martin? I'm not ready to even think about marriage yet. I've such lots and lots of things to do first."

"Maybe if you learnt to love me, you'd have different ideas, Jenni. That's what I intend to make you do. You've admitted you like me so I'm going to court you intensively now. You're not returning to London yet awhile, I know. Even when you do go, I can follow on."

"It does sound flattering," Jenni answered, "but I'm afraid it wouldn't be very practical, Martin dear. I'm going to be fiendishly busy for the rest of my stay. You realise that, don't you? I shouldn't really be taking time out with you today."

"I'll still manage to see you, Jenni. Even if I have to come and sit in the front row at one of your fashion parades."

"How you'd wriggle!" Jenni smiled. "You'd simply loathe it, wouldn't you? Now we've finished our coffee, do you mind if we go back to Venice. I have to appear with the other models at this grand fireworks display tonight."

"It won't take place before eleven at the earliest," Martin declared, but he rose with her. As they crossed the cobbled stones of the little quay he suddenly put his arm about her waist and drew her close to him for a moment.

"My adorable Jenni," he whispered, "I love you so much it's a burning pain. But I'm still prepared to wait for you

if I must. You aren't awakened as yet I can see but one of these days, you'll respond to me."

He bent his brown head to kiss her cheek. Lightly, softly, his lips touched her skin. Then he caught her up in his arms and lifted her down into the well of the powercraft, depositing her very tenderly on the red leather cushions.

"Sit still," he commanded. "Don't move close to me while we're sailing back. If you do I shall have to kiss you properly then the boat will probably slew off-course."

"You're really serious about me, aren't you?" Jenni said.

Martin nodded as he started the engine.

"More than I can ever tell you, Jenni. But what good are words anyway? They can't convey what's in my heart for you."

Half an hour later they were back in Venice. Jenni asked to be set down at the opposite side of the square instead of right at the Hotel Zucci's landing-steps. It would not be so obvious then.

"Good night, Martin," she said to him when she was ashore. "Thanks for the sail. And for everything else."

"*Au revoir*, my sweet," he answered. "We'll meet again very soon. Dream about me tonight if you can."

"Maybe I'll try," Jenni smiled. "Goodbye."

She began to walk across the square towards the hotel but hardly had she taken a few steps than she became aware she was being watched. Turning, she saw Carlotta di Falissimo and Miss Tozi standing only a few yards away near the fountain. With them was Arni, her blonde head bare to the evening sun, her blue suit matching her eyes which were hard and speculative as they rested on the English girl. Jenni knew they must all have seen Martin helping her ashore. Probably Miss Tozi had even recognised him as the man who had carried her into the hotel that rainswept night. Jenni's heart sank a little as she foresaw another rebuke coming her way now but she lifted her head with a

characteristic gesture, smiling and bowing before she went indoors.

When she reached her room, she found Sophia had already changed ready for the fireworks party. There was no time for incidental conversation as Jenni quickly got out of her beach clothes and into her brown crinkle-taffeta dress with its accompanying topaz necklace. It was a rush to get downstairs again in time to join the other models on the hotel terrace, at the foot of which their decorated gondolas were waiting.

The fireworks were magnificent. Rivers and waterfalls of coloured fire across the night sky, fountains of gold and silver, pictures tricked out in scarlet and emerald and purple. Bands played gaily and between the scintillating pieces there was singing and picturesque folk-dances on the pavements beside the canal. Jenni sat at a table with Prince Mergellena, who paid her the customary extravagant compliments. Once she felt his hand brushing against her knee. "Ah, my cousin Mario is a fortunate man indeed!" the Prince sighed as Jenni looked at him enquiringly.

Jenni rode back to the hotel with Sophia. There was nobody else in the gondola with them—Miss Tozi had firmly explained to the Prince that the models must not be escorted home not even in his elaborately gilded private gondola with the richly-uniformed boatmen. Jenni lay back against the cushions relaxing at last. Sophia sighed gratefully, kicking her shoes off.

"What made you so late back from the Lido?" she asked. "Did Tolani keep you a long time on the telephone?"

"It wasn't that at all," Jenni replied. "I met Martin after I'd left you."

"For crying out loud! Accidentally, I hope? . . . But really, Jenni. How idiotic can a girl get?"

"I like Martin. Very much."

"But he's no use to you, darling. You've got to fix your

attention on the main chance. I thought you'd decided to turn him down anyway. You said you were going to concentrate on Tolani."

"I did think we oughtn't to meet again," Jenni agreed. "But after I'd seen him today, it was difficult to send him off."

"For heaven's sake!" Sophia declared. "Don't tell me now you find you prefer him to Tolani. I couldn't bear it."

"I don't know that I do," Jenni frowned. "It's all becoming such a problem. So complicated and mixed up. I'm not actually certain if I'm in love with Mario or not, to begin with. Really in love, I mean. It's exciting when we're together and of course he's such a fascinating personality. Charming and sophisticated and terribly good-looking."

"Well, then," Sophia observed as the gondola swung round the corner into the side-canal, the gondolier crying warningly in advance. "What more do you want? Most girls would give their eye-teeth for a man with attractions like Tolani. All that and money and influence too!"

"I know. But there's still something special about Martin," Jenni maintained. "When I'm out with him I seem to be completely happy and at ease. I think it's because he's so straightforward and sincere. I feel safe and secure with him. He does love me and he wants to marry me, too."

Sophia gave a horrified little scream.

"Oh, no, Jenni!"

"Oh, yes, Sophia!"

"He must be out of his mind. To think you'd ever go and live with him in some squalid little back street cottage in Yorkshire—"

"Lancashire actually."

"It's all the same. Spoiling yourself with dreary cooking and housework—Jenni! You haven't accepted him, have you? You couldn't consider him for a moment."

"No. Of course I haven't. Don't get so worked-up, dear."

Sophia sat back again.

"You did give me quite a fright," she complained. "And I think he's got astounding nerve to approach you again too. I told him clearly myself that you weren't interested in him."

"Oh, yes, I remember," Jenni said. "By the way, Martin told me he'd sent me a letter the other night and the porter had delivered it to you. I don't seem to have received it yet."

"I forgot all about it," Sophia declared. "Do forgive me, Jenni. It's still in my drawer, I'll find it for you immediately we get back."

"Have you read it?" Jenni wanted to know.

"No, I haven't," Sophia retorted. "I'm not that interested in your affairs."

"I thought you must be since you seem to object to my seeing Martin so violently."

"You're mistaken," Sophia announced. "I've no personal views about him at all. I'm simply trying to train you professionally. You came to the House a raw inexperienced girl and you said you wanted to be a success as a model. Well, I've been showing you how but you don't seem to listen. Still, if you don't care to take advantage of my know-how it's perfectly all right."

"You've been kind to me, Sophia. I appreciate it. But just the same I have to make up my own mind about Martin. And about Mario as well, if it comes to that."

"Only a bird-brain would imagine there's any comparison between them," Sophia remarked icily. "You're going to get yourself into a crazy mess if you go on playing around with them both like this."

"It is *my* life, after all."

"Granted, I'm sure. But don't come running to me for

sympathy when you land yourself in trouble because you won't get any."

They rode the rest of the way back to the hotel in complete silence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JENNI APOLOGISED TO Sophia next morning and was graciously forgiven but she sensed that the atmosphere between them would be stiffer and more strained now. The girl realised it was asking too much for Sophia, older and utterly dedicated to her career, to appreciate her present doubts and uncertainties. She did not thoroughly understand them herself, come to that. She kept on repeating she was determined to become a top flight model, delighted with the success she had just won, eager to further it and to achieve all the glamorous prospects opening up ahead. Logic told her Martin Heywood had no place in such schemes. Sophia was quite right about that. So the obvious and the sensible thing was to tell him so frankly and then cut him out of her life. Again exactly as Sophia advised. Yet as soon as she saw Martin, heard his voice speaking to her and watched his slow, quiet smile it seemed to become impossible.

There was an intangible something about Martin which she could not resist. Perhaps it was his essential strength, his force of character acting as the magnet. Could she possibly be falling in love with him without properly understanding the fact? Was it love when you felt instinctively 'right' with somebody, liking and trusting them too? Or was it love she felt for Mario who had such power to quicken her pulses and charm her into another world? Mario, who had every-

thing to offer which Jenni needed at present. How did you tell and distinguish the true values?

Jenni could only hope the remaining days in Venice would serve to show her clearly what was in her heart. She felt restless and a little edgy as she went along to the hair-dresser's. Arni was in the next chair—"looking like the cat that swallowed the canary," Jenni thought to herself. When the models joined Miss Tozi later, Jenni fancied the little woman looked at her very keenly but she did not pass any comment and the girls boarded their motor-launch. Today it was taking five of them to what Jenni thought of as the mainland. Somebody had conceived the bright idea of photographing coats and tweeds and travel accessories at the big white railway station on the other side of the lagoon.

The reception which the station officials accorded them was musical and regal. The models changed in specially-reserved waiting-rooms with the radio playing jazz in the background and were escorted out into the concourse through crowds of admiring Italians plus a generous sprinkling of foreign tourists. Jenni was swept along by her camera-man on to one of the platforms, where she stood beside a gleaming aluminium express train. One hand was on the boarding rail as she took up a striking pose, her grey Donegal suit pinned so tightly at the back it was a positive effort to breathe. But the photographer demanded the line to be straighter still so his girl assistant pulled Jenni's waist-band tighter and tighter, quite without mercy.

"Smile?" she managed to enquire when the man went behind his camera at last.

"No, no!" he screamed. "You are sad and lonely—you cannot smile. You sigh. You droop. Let the arm go and the body be loose with it. Your lover is being left behind in Venice so you are desolated. Convey that for me if you please."

Jenni assumed an obediently miserable expression while the audience sighed understandingly. Just as the bulb flashed and the picture was captured, Mario's voice greeted her.

"Now you can be gay again," it said. "Which is much more appropriate for a beautiful morning."

He stood there with two other men, attended by a posse of laughing porters carrying much expensive luggage.

"Mario! You're back again. How nice."

"We have this moment descended from the Milano Rapide," he told her. "Permit me to have the pleasure of introducing my business associates—" His companions bowed over Jenni's hand while the photographer turned his attention to Carol and Jane in their smart Fifth Avenue jackets.

Jenni was escorted back across the concourse to the changing-room again. The crowd parted admiringly to let her through.

"I shall see you tonight," Mario murmured to her, "at the gala première of the new film. I have a gift for you, too." He turned back to the porter who was following him and took a large white box from the luggage pile. "A token from Milan, Jenni. Some of the new jersey. The colours are enchanting. All the shades of a stained-glass window in a church."

Jenni thanked him and nodding to the men, hurried inside the models' room with the box in her arms.

"Whatever have you got there." Sophia enquired.

Pulling off her suit, Jenni told her. There was a sneering laugh from the mirror on the other side of them and Arni said loudly enough for everybody in the room to hear:

"Sweaters from Milan. But of course! The Count gave his sweaters to Lotte last year when he was enamoured of her. Because sweaters do not cost him any money. He has a factory in Milan which manufactures them!"

She came round the dressing-table, adjusting her peaked hat, putting on her leather gloves.

"But I am glad to hear the Count has returned to Venice," she added as she went out to be photographed, "I have something most interesting to say to him."

"What do you know?" murmured Sophia as she rose in turn, draping her purple mohair stole. Then she also went off to join the camera-men. Jenni saw she was not going to receive any support from Sophia now. She must cope alone and since she did not know exactly how to snub Arni, she could only pretend the Swedish girl had not spoken at all.

It was a brilliant film that was shown to Venetian society in the big modernistic cinema that night. A tense psychological study of love and hate which held the fashionable audience in spellbound silence. Jenni wore an opal moonlight net studded with rhinestones, dutifully trying to immerse herself in the picture, her hands in her lap, her gaze fixed on the screen. She was not very successful because she was too conscious of Mario in the next seat. Once she stole a sidelong glance at him. As though instinctively he turned his head towards her for a moment, his face etched in the dimness like a classic coin. His fingers, closed over hers then went away again as he returned his gaze to the shadowy figures in front of them.

The reception which followed was a suitably glamorous occasion. Jenni drifted across the shimmering floor on the arm of a middle-aged Hollywood film star who kept attempting to make a date with her—"Not much time I guess though because my wife's due on Sunday." When everybody went in to supper, the Duc di Falissimo rescued her and led her to the table. Jenni supposed he was now remaining closely in attendance in public since Mario had returned to Venice.

But even with all his presidential duties to carry out,

Mario still contrived to find an opportunity for exchanging a few quick words with Jenni.

"It is correct for a gentleman to wait upon a lady," he said to her softly as they stood together for a few moments, "but I am begging you to waive the etiquette for once and come to the Palazzo Tolani at noon tomorrow."

"Yes, certainly," Jenni answered. "There aren't any day engagements I know."

"Precisely," he smiled. "You rest and make yourself even more beautiful for the evening. Then you will wear *Venetian Dusk* again I understand? Ah, perfection! I wish to see you in it most particularly."

His eyes telling her more than his lips, Mario moved away as the Duc hurried up to them. Several times during the evening Jenni had noticed Carlotta's gaze fixed upon her, so she was not entirely surprised next day when she was ushered into a small high-ceilinged apartment at the palazzo and found the Duchesa there alone.

"Goodday, Miss Jenni," she said, inclining her smooth little head. "I instructed the steward to bring you here because I wish to speak with you before you see my brother. Please to sit down."

Jenni subsided into a high-backed tapestry chair, her pale skirts contrasting with the ancient wood. Carlotta began without preamble:

"This is a highly embarrassing moment for me, Miss Jenni, but it is forced upon me by my brother. Repeatedly I have asked him not to make himself the object of scandalous gossip and laughter behind the hand by singling you out so openly from the other models who are here this month."

"Oh!" Jenni murmured, not quite sure how she ought to comment upon this observation. "I suppose people do talk about everybody else on these occasions."

"Exactly. I am glad you realise that. I am well aware

Mario has chosen you to receive his adoration during the Fashion Month and it's quite natural. He always likes to have a special companion for the period. Last year it was a German girl called Lotte—very fair and beautiful. As usual he was careless of appearances and there were many shocking tales printed in the newspapers. Even the cabaret performers were making sly references to Lotte and Mario and everybody understood and laughed loudly. I was utterly humiliated."

"I'm sure," Jenni agreed, "it couldn't have been pleasant for you."

"I suffered greatly," Carlotta said, "with other members of our family. This year I begged Mario to use some discretion in conducting his affairs. But yet he is showing his fondness for you so persistently in public it is once again disturbing. My husband is unhappy also, and my mother. At her age it is not good for her either. You make us all feel desolated, Miss Jenni."

The girl knew her colour was beginning to rise at this attack. "You speak as if I'm having some kind of nasty intrigue with Count Tolani," she said. "I'm not and I resent the insinuation that I am."

"But what else do you expect? What do you think everybody in Venice is saying when you are so constantly with Mario? He was making love to you that night I came to his rooms, was he not? You cannot deny it. Not that I care in any case. If Mario wishes to make a fool of himself with a woman, he will and not for the first time. What does distress me is for your association to be so public. That I will not have. Our family name is an ancient one and very proud. I do not intend it shall be smirched by such stupid behaviour."

"Well, I don't see what I can do about it myself," Jenni said frankly. "If the fact that Count Tolani shows me some degree of friendship—"

"Friendship!" Carlotta echoed the word derisively. "Why pretend to be so inhibited? Is it your English prudery, Miss Jenni?"

"Whatever you wish to call it," Jenni conceded trying to keep her temper. "But since you do object to the Count's behaviour, then you should ask him to alter it."

"He only laughs at me," the other woman said. "Which is why I am speaking to you now."

"But what can I do?" Jenni enquired. "I can't be rude."

"Nor do you wish to be," Carlotta answered. "Plainly it is to your advantage to have Mario dancing round you in public. It informs the world he is your devoted lover."

"Really, Duchesa, I can't have—"

"Permit me to finish," Carlotta snapped, her black eyes glittering. "If you will announce you are ill this afternoon and absent yourself from the rest of the function this week, I will pay you one thousand English pounds. And I will come to the House of Donne to buy clothes on my next visit to London."

Jenni could not believe she had heard aright.

"You'll pay me a thousand pounds!" she echoed. "Not to see the Count again, you mean?"

"Precisely, Miss Jenni. If you will go back to your hotel right away and retire to bed, I will send my own physician to diagnose your sickness. He will decide it is infectious and keep you apart from Mario and everybody else until you fly home on Saturday. So there will be no more ugly chatter and you will be the richer for your little sacrifice."

"You must be out of your mind," Jenni said, "to think up a horrible scheme like that. How mean can you get?"

"Mean!" It was Carlotta's turn to flush, a pale river running under her delicately-enamelled skin. "I do not appreciate such a word, Miss Jenni. I am asking you to listen to reason, that is all."

Jenni was now so annoyed she flung all her caution to the winds.

"I never listen to reason, Duchesa," she retorted. "I'm not that kind of person. Whether your brother and I continue our friendship is entirely for him to say. Now I should like to see Count Tolani, please. He is expecting me at noon, you know, and it's ten minutes past the hour now."

Carlotta looked at her.

"Very well, Miss Jenni," she answered and her tone was icy chill. "You choose to be obstinate and I think you will regret it. Because I shall certainly end this liaison. Make no mistake about that."

She pulled the velvet rope near her chair. When the manservant came, she told him to take Jenni to the Count. Mario was in the library, a great domed room with green-panelled walls lined with richly-bound books between its handsome pillars. He jumped up from the desk as Jenni was shown in and caught her hands in both of his.

"So you have come—how gracious!" he said happily. "But you look flushed and angry. Has something disturbed you?"

"Your sister has been talking to me. That's why I'm late. She caught me as I came in."

"I know what Carlotta has said," Mario remarked. "She does not approve of me at all."

"Nor of me, if it comes to that," Jenni added.

"She is a jealous woman, my heart. We quarrel constantly. Only yesterday she attempted to make mischief between you and I."

"She did? How, Mario?"

He smiled contemptuously.

"She brought me some absurd tale about a mysterious lover. A man whom she declared you crept out of your hotel to visit in secret—such nonsense! She insisted I asked Miss Tozi in her presence, which I did. Tozi explained this

gentleman was merely a glassblower from Murano whom you had encountered. Miss Sophia also, and as she had already observed, how could there possibly be any association between you and him. So Carlotta looked extremely foolish. Then I discovered she had got this ridiculous story from Arni Larsen. Which didn't surprise me in the least."

Jenni said thoughtfully: "No. I suppose not. Because Arni is jealous, too, isn't she? She's crazy about you herself."

"We met in Stockholm," Mario pointed out, "I was attracted to her a little then. Nothing serious, you understand. Just trifling attentions while I was making the arrangements for the Swedish contribution to the Fashion Month. But it seems Arni read more into my escort than I had ever intended."

"Your sister told me about a German girl called Lotte Something too. The Duchesa said you were devoted to her at last year's Month."

"So? That was indeed last year, Jenni. I could not even tell you where Lotte is today. What is past is past." His hand began to stroke her bare arm. "Believe me, Jenni, these were nothing beside you. What I feel for you now is a thousand times stronger than any emotion either of those girls ever aroused in me." His mouth brushed her cheek, his light fingertips soothing and caressing her arm. "I adore you madly, Jenni. Surely you know it?"

"Do you, Mario? Why?"

"Why?" he repeated softly. "Does there have to be logic and reason for love? Because your arm is so smooth like velvet and your voice strokes my ears. Because your eyes are so bright and your laughter has silver bells in it. Because you are Jenni, the utterly enchanting."

He kissed her lips very gently. Then he put her away from him.

"Tonight," he said, "but not this midday. It is not the

moment. Please to sit down, Jenni. In that chair. There is something I have to show you."

He unlocked a drawer of the desk and took out some flat leather cases monogrammed "T" in gold. Opening one one he held the contents up so Jenni could see them. The girl gasped as she saw a magnificent diamond spray necklace, a glittering river of fire composed of dozens of stones.

"Oh, how wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I've never seen diamonds blaze so before."

"They are most skilfully cut," Mario remarked "The craftsmen in the old days excelled at doing such work. This is part of my family jewellery you understand. Here are earrings and bracelets and brooches too—" He was opening the other cases to reveal their sparkling gems. Jenni felt her eyes must be popping as they stared at all these fabulous treasures. She had never imagined Mario was so wealthy as this.

"I want you to wear some of this jewellery tonight," he was saying now. "When I saw *Venetian Dusk* it was apparent the dress needed the appropriate decoration. So I am going to lend them to you tonight. Let me see how this necklace looks on you."

Obediently Jenni rose and he fastened a row of glittering diamonds round her throat, standing back to consider the effect through half-closed eyes.

"No. Too heavy," he pronounced, "your neck is so exquisitely slender. I think perhaps this lacework one will suit you better."

He took half an hour to make the final decisions. Finally he laid the jewels he had chosen carefully aside.

"Now if you will please come back here at nine tonight," he said, "then I can put on the pieces myself before we all go off to the Cypriani Hotel and the Royal Hall dance."

"I'll come since you tell me to," Jenni answered. "You are the chairman of the committee after all. Only—well,

the Duchesa won't like this, will she? You know she won't, Mario."

He chuckled, his eyes twinkling gaily.

"Carlotta will hate it," he admitted, "she will blaze with fury all evening, in fact. And she won't be able to do anything about it. Her face as she looks at you wearing heirloom Tolani diamonds will afford me the greatest amusement every time I see it."

It suddenly occurred to Jenni this attitude was simply typical of Mario. He really would derive impish delight in watching his sister's anger, which she would incidentally have to smother in public for the sake of appearances.

"So you're doing it deliberately?" Jenni asked.

"But of course," he laughed. "A man must assert his authority sometimes."

Jenni thought he might have done this more considerately but it was not her affair to comment. There were several other points which had emerged from this conversation and she needed to mull them over in her mind quietly. She walked back towards the Hotel Zucci for the sake of fresh air and exercise. It was no great distance and hidden behind dark glasses, Jenni could now ignore all the whistles and hisses and the cries of "*Ah, bellissima!*" which inevitably followed her progress.

As Jenni reached the little square outside the hotel, she saw Martin standing beside an ivy-draped wall, plainly waiting for her.

"Hello, there," she exclaimed, aware she was glad to see him. There was something so dependable about his broad-shouldered figure, certainly a change from the wayward aristocrat she had just left.

"Why aren't you at Murano today?" she continued. "Is it a festival or something?"

"No. The factory is working today but I'm not," he answered as he took her arm in his usual manner. "I'm on

holiday until next week. I want to see something of you before you go back on Saturday. I warned you, remember?"

"Yes. So you did."

"Let's go and lunch," Martin said. "Would you enjoy one of the cafés in St. Mark's Square? We could feed the pigeons just like all the best tourists."

"Yes, let's," Jenni said recklessly. "Where they have those luscious cream and almond fingers, please. I want one with my fruit juice."

"What! Risking your precious measurements?" he laughed. "I thought you watched your diet like a hawk."

"I do normally but—I feel absolutely mad at this moment. I'm horrible when I am mad, too."

"Not to me," he said. "Of course you get het-up sometimes. Everybody does."

"You don't mind?"

"No. Why should I? You're a human girl, aren't you?"

Jenni sighed contentedly.

"You're a rock, Martin," she told him, "a blissful pillar of granite. I feel immensely better. And after one of those forbidden pastries, I'll be right back on form again I know!"

Jenni could not stay long in the sunshine because she had an appointment at the hotel at three.

"Sophia and I are being fitted for our costumes for the Masked Ball," she explained.

"That's the grand finale I've been reading about, is it? To wind up all the fashion celebrations. What are you going as?"

"They're seventeenth century gowns. All the models are wearing them. Mine's green satin and brocade with a funny little three-cornered black hat draped with lace. We have to powder our hair white too. Nobody will be able to recognise us until we unmask."

"I shall," Martin declared. "I'll know you the moment you walk into the room."

"But you're not going to the ball, Martin dear."

"Would you be surprised if I did?" he asked. "I can dance and I could easily disguise myself as a gondolier or some such."

"But even if you managed to get a ticket, you really couldn't spend your money on me," Jenni argued. "I don't expect you know what these kind of affairs cost, do you? A ticket for the ball alone would cost you twenty thousand lire. That's over ten pounds, before you even buy a programme or a drink or anything!"

"There must be plenty of rich playboys in Venice these days," Martin remarked. "So you think that's too much for me to pay, do you, Jenni?"

"Of course it is," she said. "After all, you do work for your living, don't you? Just the same as I do. You mustn't think of it, Martin. Please don't."

"It's sweet of you to be so concerned for me, darling," he said softly. "I appreciate it. Will you come and have dinner with me tonight? We could go along to Erberia—the market quarter behind the Rialto Bridge—and find a cheap little restaurant there. Afterwards we might listen to the open-air concert outside the Arts Museum. That's quite free."

"Now you're mocking me," Jenni complained. "What's wrong with remembering your budget, anyhow. But I suppose you're just naturally extravagant like so many men."

"Do you know so many then, my love?" he teased.

"A few. I once went out with a commercial artist to a Chelsea espresso bar and he—"

"I refuse to listen to stories about my predecessors," Martin declared. "You know, Jenni, I'm learning a lot about models from you. I'd always assumed before they were

hard-enamelled young baggages who chose an escort strictly according to the size of his wallet."

"You've been misinformed," Jenni told him, "seeing too many of those silly TV plays. They always seem to make the model too thin and much too tough as well. I daresay some girls do go after men with money but they do that in all walks of life, don't they?"

"Yes. If they're that way inclined. But you're not."

"No. I don't think I am," Jenni declared. "I'd hate to be utterly materialistic. Although I do try to save some of my pay each week. But when you're in a place like Venice that's full of tempting shops, it becomes rather difficult."

Martin was laughing at her.

"Jenni, you're adorable!" he said softly. "I'm falling deeper into love with you every minute. You will have dinner with me tonight, won't you?"

She shook her head.

"Can't do, Martin. I have to work. At the Cypriani Hotel. The American Ambassador is in Venice and he's throwing a grand banquet there. Afterwards we all go on to another party I believe. I'm showing an evening dress called *Venetian Dusk* and I'm going to be loaded with diamonds too. Real ones. Worth a fortune."

"Bought from your honest earnings, I presume? Or could they be the anonymous tribute of a millionaire admirer? Not that I'd blame the man."

"Idiot!" Jenni laughed back. "They're on loan, of course. Just for the occasion. I shall be scared stiff every minute I have them on in case anything happens to them."

"Ah, now there's an idea," Martin said. "I'll sneak up behind and relieve you of them. Then we can get married on the proceeds. How would you like that?"

"Not at all. Fancy being married to a jailbird. It would be so lonely while he was serving his years in an Italian

prison! Now please let's be sensible again, Martin. I must go in a few minutes or I'll be late for my fitting."

On the way back to the Zucci they had to walk down the narrow street in which Martin's hotel was situated. 'Carra' said the sign on the shabby old façade; a group of students were sitting on the steps joking with the fat balloon-woman who was offering her gaily-coloured wares.

"Is it all right here?" Jenni enquired, glancing at the shirt-sleeved porter in the doorway. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yes. It's clean enough and the food is well-cooked, although I must say there isn't much variety. Still you don't expect Venetian luxury for a mere ten thousand lire a week."

"Ten thousand. Is that the rate? About half as much as a ticket for the Masked Ball costs! You see what I meant now, don't you? If you don't mind, Martin, I'll walk round the corner and across the bridge myself. Because if the other girls happened to see us together, they'd only start gossiping."

"As you wish, Jenni." He touched her cheek with his fingers for a moment. "Till tomorrow then."

Jenni felt much brighter as she went into the Zucci. Whilst Mario stirred and excited with his deliberate charm, she always felt suffused with a deep satisfaction and peace after she had been with Martin. She found Sophia already in their room, Gina hovering round. Two identical costumes were laid out on the beds, one in pale blue, the other green.

"They'll be outrageously heavy in this heat," Sophia complained. "Still it is the last shindig of the Month, thank goodness! I can hardly wait to get into that aircraft for home."

It was a kind of mass fitting since several models had their rooms on the same floor so the Italian seamstresses ran

to and fro while the girls sauntered about in various stages of dress, visiting and chattering. Gina was even coaxed into making tea for some of them. Then Jenni found herself alone with Sophia. Impulsively she turned to the older girl who was at the mirror and said :

"Sophia, I believe Miss Tozi asked you about me and Martin one day. And you told her there couldn't possibly be anything between us—since Martin was only a glass-blower, I mean."

Sophia hesitated a moment before she answered evenly, "That's right, Jenni, I did. I laughed the suggestion out of court. I was under the mistaken impression I was telling the truth and giving you a helping hand at the same time."

"It was kind of you, dear. When did this talk take place, by the way?"

"Nearly a fortnight ago," Sophia answered. "Just after that Sunday you went to the beach with him. Tozi was wondering. Quite naturally."

"I see. That was before you and I—yes, of course. It would be."

Sophia did not pick up the gambit. She combed her hair and remarked as she did so : "Carol and I are meeting the TV boys in Harry's Bar at seven for peach-gins. Speciality of the house there it seems. If you care to come along too?"

"I don't think I'd better," Jenni declared. "I shall need to dress early, you see. I have to go to the Pálazzo Tolani before the banquet. I'm being decked out in their heirloom diamonds for the occasion and Mario wants to put them on personally."

"No!" Sophia exclaimed, turning to stare at Jenni. "But I've never heard of Tolani lending his jewels before. They're said to be fabulous stones."

"Yes, they are. I've seen them."

"You'll be the sensation of the evening. Everybody will stare and gape and stare again."

"That's what Mario has in mind apparently," Jenni said. "They really are the most glorious jewels you ever saw, Sophia. The necklace I'm to wear is in a kind of lace pattern like cobwebs. There are two bracelets that match and drop ear-rings."

Gabrielle had come into the room, unnoticed by the two occupants.

"What is this?" she cried. "The Count will lend you his family jewels to wear tonight? Mon Dieu! Miss Arni will tear your eyes out when she hears of it."

Sophia gave a faintly sardonic smile.

"We look as though we're in for a thoroughly gay time at the dinner-table," she remarked. "Get my scarf, will you, Gina, please? It will have to be shortened before I can wear it with the silver lamé. I did ask the signorina to come and alter it for me . . ."

Gabrielle hurried off to spread the news and Jenni reflected once more she was out on her own now. Two men between them seemed to have complicated her whole life. Her lips twisted wryly as she remembered how firmly she had decreed she would be calm and cool and sensible in Venice. She had not bargained for the magic which the city held, insinuating itself into the blood so gently and sweetly just as the waters lapped at the ancient stones and flowed so quietly over them.

Jenni did not feel very happy when she put on *Venetian Dusk* that evening. As she studied herself critically after making-up, she saw in the triple full-length mirror she was looking her loveliest but the fact did not afford her any special satisfaction. The soft unusual blue of the dress set off her red hair and the white of the neck and shoulders she had kept so carefully out of the direct sunshine. She wished Martin could see her wearing *Venetian Dusk*. He had never seen her actually modelling clothes, of course.

Suddenly it became clear to Jenni she preferred Martin

to the handsome Italian aristocrat. Martin was more trustworthy, a companionable friend and protector, his love restrained as yet though she realised it could burn hotly if she gave the word. Mario was a fascinating, heady mixture who certainly excited when he chose. His idea of love was an ardent wooing with a superbly passionate fire. But Jenni had to admit he was fundamentally quite unreliable. Malicious too if he felt in the mood. This business of the jewels was proving that. Jenni stared uneasily at her reflection as she absorbed the moment of truth.

It was Martin to whom she instinctively turned as a man, but it was Mario who was important in this glamorous fashion world she had made her own and who would open the doors to success for her. How did you solve a problem like that? Sophia always maintained firmly your head could be made to rule your heart. It seemed comparatively easy for her but suppose it was alien to one's essential nature? How could you force yourself, suppress yourself and still find happiness in the end? It was one more of the questions Jenni could not answer as yet.

The private Tolani gondola came to fetch her. There were bright scarlet and green ribbons decking it, matching the cushions, and the boatman wore his uniform with an elegant air. Mario was taking no chances of her non-arrival. Jenni thought as she was poled along the canal towards the palazzo. Immediately she landed she was ushered into the library where Mario waited, immaculate in evening clothes, the purple ribbon of an Order across his gleaming white waistcoat. He caught Jenni's hands in his, kissing her cheek lightly. Then he produced the flat leather cases and fastened the diamond necklace round the girl's throat. It hung like a cascade of brilliant silver fire.

"Every woman in the room will envy you tonight," Mario said. "Your youth and beauty and your gown, and now your jewels too!"

"Do you think it's wise?" Jenni ventured. "I mean, if the Duchess really does object—"

Mario laughed as he held up the ear-rings.

"Carlotta has been raging all the afternoon," he declared cheerfully. "Now she is silent at last, accustomed to the fact. And incidentally quite out of breath!"

Then he clasped the bracelets round her wrists, holding her at arm's length for admiration.

"If only I were a great artist," he sighed. "I would paint you as you stand and create a masterpiece for all the world to see! I salute you, my beautiful Jenni. I kiss your hand in utter devotion."

He suited the action to the words. Then he turned her fingers over, looking at them.

"Why do you not wear rings, Jenni?" he asked.

"I haven't got one worth wearing with this gown," she smiled. "The little garnet ring that was my mother's would just look silly."

Mario frowned.

"It would be fitting to have jewels on your hands, also," he remarked. "Unfortunately there is no time for me to get rings for you now. I should have remembered earlier." Then he kissed her hand again and said as he released it:

"Tomorrow you shall have a ring for yourself, my enchanting Jenni. I shall give you one as a souvenir to take back to London. So you do not forget me when we are apart."

"I shan't do that, Mario."

"Ah, sweetly generous as always," he said, "no wonder I am so madly in love with you. I have been trying to arrange for us to dine together again but it has been impossible. Carlotta keeps too closely at my heels. I had forgotten you go home so soon but there is still time. Tomorrow we should find the opportunity to be alone at last and without interruption."

"That's the Masked Ball," Jenni pointed out, "the grand finale of the Fashion Month."

"It will be quite easy," Mario nodded. "We shall both appear there at eleven. You will be with the rest of the models and I shall be separate with Carlotta and Giovanni and our party. Then soon we will slip away. We shan't be missed because there will be at least a thousand other guests and all masked until two o'clock. I am arranging supper in a private room at a discreet little restaurant near the Grand Canal. Then we can return just before it is time to unmask. Don't you think it a clever scheme, my heart of hearts?"

Jenni did not get the chance to tell him her opinion because the door flew open and Carlotta walked into the library. She was wearing a sweeping gown of palest amber satin, emeralds winking at her throat and arms and banding her smooth black head.

"Cocktails are being served, Mario," she said, "and your guests are waiting for you. Good evening, Miss Jenni." She bowed to the girl, her eyes sweeping over her expressionlessly.

"Good evening, Duchesa."

Carlotta led the way down the staircase into the great hall with its stately pillars and marble statues in which about twenty people had gathered. They stood talking and laughing while the servants offered silver trays of champagne cocktails. Some of the guests Jenni already knew; the Prince Mergellena who sighed over her noisily in his usual fashion, and one or two of the American women. Presently the party began to disperse out to the waiting gondolas to be taken to the exclusive Cypriani Hotel for the banquet. Mario came towards Jenni but his sister waved him back imperiously.

"It is fitting for you to escort the Principessa and Mrs. Van Booren," she declared. "Miss Jenni can travel with Giovanni and myself in our boat."

"I will wait for you at the Cypriani quay," he said, "I should like you and Jenni to enter with me, one on either side." Then he went away and Carlotta turned to the waiting girl.

"There is plenty of time as yet," she said, "would you care to take another cocktail?"

"No, thank you, Duchesa."

"No? Then before we leave, I will ask your indulgence for a few moments. I need to beg a small favour from you, Mis. Jenni."

"Yes?" the girl said warily.

"It is for the Contessa Tolani—my mother, you understand. She is old and extremely frail so that she can no longer leave her rooms. I have told her you wear our family jewels tonight and she is most interested, and is anxious to see you in them. She wore them herself on her wedding day."

Carlotta's tone was so gentle and quietly reasonable Jenni stared in amazement. As the older woman met her eyes she even smiled a little.

"But—do you really mean you aren't annoyed any more then?" Jenni asked her frankly. "After the way you spoke the other morning I thought you felt bitterly at the very idea of my putting on the diamonds."

Carlotta shrugged delicately.

"I was displeased at first I admit," she said, "but sometimes it is wiser to accept the inevitable gracefully. My brother is a law unto himself, I fear. He always will be. Regardless of other people's hearts or wishes. Please be kind enough to forget that most unfortunate conversation and allow my mother to have the opportunity of admiring her jewels again. I should appreciate it deeply."

"Why, of course," Jenni agreed then, smiling back because she felt she could be magnanimous now. "They're such superb diamonds, aren't they? It's a tremendous

honour and a thrill too, to be permitted to wear them like this."

"We will go to my mother's apartments," Carlotta declared. "Thank you, Miss Jenni."

Jenni picked up the white fox stole, carrying it across her arm because the evening was still warm and followed Carlotta out of the hall. They went along several empty corridors and down a short flight of stairs into another smaller hall. Carlotta went up to a door at the far end of this. There was a key already in the lock and she turned it.

"In here, Miss Jenni, if you please."

The girl walked innocently over the threshold and promptly the door fell to behind her. Then as she stopped in surprise she heard the click as the key was turned back in the lock. It was a moment before she realised what had happened. Startled and vexed, she banged on the panels vigorously.

"Duchesa! Duchesa! Please let me out . . . Let me out, I say . . . Please . . . let me out!"

Carlotta laughed, a harsh and ugly sound

"You can stay there until I return from the Cypriani," she said. "The jewels will be safe at least. To think you could be allowed to flaunt them in public for all Venice to see and talk about. You presumptuous little fool!"

Her high heels tapped away down the hall and there was silence in the little room where Jenni stood alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FOR SEVERAL MINUTES Jenni banged on the door and called for help as loudly as she could but only the echoes came back to deride her. Impotent and angry, still astonished at the ease with which Carlotta had duped her, Jenni had to stand away from the door at last. She looked round the apartment in which she was imprisoned. It was small and square with a low ceiling, the walls lined with shabby books that gave off a faintly musty smell. The only furniture was a long red chaise-longue, two carved wooden chairs and a large terrestrial globe on an ebony stand. The single window was high in the wall and did not appear to open. Jenni put one of the chairs below, hoping to climb up and see exactly where she was but it was not sufficiently high.

There seemed nothing else for it but to sit down and wait several hours until Carlotta returned and released her. How in the world was Carlotta going to explain Jenni's non-appearance to her brother and everybody else? Miss Tozi would immediately miss her from among the models and ask where she was. How did Carlotta propose to disarm the chaperone?

Morosely Jenni flicked the globe with her finger and watched it revolve. She glanced at the rows of old books but they were all in Italian. It struck her this was actually the first occasion she had been entirely alone for any period since her arrival in Venice. She ought to use the hours

thinking carefully through her many problems and reach some proper decisions at last. She had let things slide these last few days and it might be a wise thing to leave Venice feeling sure and certain about the road immediately ahead.

Accordingly Jenni sat down on a wooden stair and pillowed her chin in her hands in a characteristic attitude. Only somehow she couldn't think properly. She was too restless and disturbed. In a few minutes she got up and walked round the room again. As she wandered she suddenly noticed a gap of several inches between the rows of bookshelves, running up from the carpet. It looked like a door that was not fully closed. Jenni pulled at the edges of the shelves and gradually they swung apart, groaning reproachfully. Beyond was a flight of stone steps with a faint gleam of light at the bottom. A little apprehensively Jenni ventured down.

The stairs ended in a small tiled cellar without any furniture at all. The light came from a square aperture in the wall protected outside by a wrought-iron grille. Jenni went over and found she could press her face against the bars to look out. She discovered the glassless window was only a few feet above the level of the canal. By straining her neck she could just manage to see the edge of the landing-stage of the Palazzo Tolani and the steps between the tubs of geraniums leading up to the great door. Everything on the water was quiet. The party had long since left for Cypriani's but perhaps somebody might come back to look for her and then she could call out and attract attention as their boat arrived. Or was she too low down near the waterline to make herself heard?

Jenni stood there for some time, the stone floor damp and chill to her feet in their light silver sandals. It seemed ages before there was any movement on the canal but at last the water began to swell and ripple. She heard the faint chug-chug as a small red and white powercraft floated

slowly into her line of view. Jenni's heart leapt exultantly as she recognised the man at the wheel.

"Martin! Martin!" she screamed as loudly as she could. Even so she had to repeat his name a dozen times, the blood pounding through her veins, before he heard her at last. He swung the boat round, staring at the façade of the palazzo before he finally located the little window with the face in it. Swiftly, expertly, he allowed his craft his glide over to it.

"Jenni!" he exclaimed, leaning down over the side to speak to her. "Good grief, what are you doing down there? What's happened? I was waiting to see you leave for the banquet."

"There was a misunderstanding," Jenni told him. "I got locked into one of the rooms here and nobody seems to have missed me yet. Please get me out, Martin. As quickly as you can—it's horrible in this cellar."

"I'll have you out in a few minutes, darling," he promised. "Just hang on a little longer while I go to the door and tell the servants you're in there."

"Bless you," Jenni said then. "Don't be longer than you can help."

Martin shot his craft away and next Jenni saw his feet and legs going up the steps, vanishing from her view. Sighing with relief she returned to the library and sat down on the wooden chair, waiting for the door to open and let her out. But nobody came. She twisted and untwisted her hands, walked round the room and flicked the globe but the door remained blank. She started to hammer on it then, so there could be no doubt as to exactly where she was, but only echoes came back to her.

Frightened now, her heart thumping, Jenni ran down to the cellar again and pressed her face to the bars. Presently she saw the powercraft gliding towards her. Martin leant over to say: "They won't believe anybody can be locked in, Jenni. I've argued and shouted and offered to bring the

steward along to see you, but it's no use. They simply closed the door in my face. So I'm going along to fetch the police. Do you think you can manage to hold on a little longer?"

"Oh, Martin! Do I have to? I'm frozen to the bone! Not the police though—there'd be such a ghastly scandal. Couldn't you go round to Cypriani's and tell Count Tolani or Miss Tozi or somebody that I'm in here. Discreetly, I mean."

"I've a better idea," he answered. "This ironwork looks rather loose to me. The brickwork is very old at this side too. Let's see if it will give."

He took the boat-hook and fastened the craft to one of the iron bars.

"Stand away, Jenni," he commanded, "there'll probably be a splash."

Putting the craft into reverse, he pulled away. There was a low rumbling noise then a sharp crack and a crash. Water poured in, to slop round Jenni's feet, soaking her sandals and long flowing skirts. She gasped in horror and then she saw the bars had gone and Martin was leaning out of the boat to touch her.

"This is the only way to get you out quickly," he was saying. "Now come up as close to me as you can get. Another few inches . . . that's it. Now lift up your arms. Don't be scared, darling, you know you can trust yourself to me. Here we go then. Hold tight."

He seized her under her armpits and swung her bodily upwards, hauling her through the window. There was barely room to pass and her dress caught on the rough edges of the stonework, ripping sharply. The next minute she was dropped on the cushions of the boat, half lying, half sitting, gasping with mingled fright and relief, letting the clean air fill her lungs once more.

"All right now?" Martin asked, bending over her. Jenni nodded, giving him a little smile and he nodded thankfully.

"You've really had me worried, sweetheart," he said. "You know there's more to this than appears on the surface. Those servants would have gone running to let you out if you really had been locked up by accident. But it was plain they'd had their orders."

"Yes. I expect they had. Oh, just look at my skirt! The edges are in ribbons. It's ruined."

"The first thing you need is a hot bath and some dry clothes," Martin declared. "That skirt is dripping, I see."

Jenni shivered with horror as she examined her dress.

"Whatever will Mr. Erik say about this!" she cried.

"Who cares?" Martin said as he started the engine. "All that matters is to make sure you don't catch a nasty chill." He sent the boat along the canal as fast as it could go. At the junction of the canals he gave a loud warning hail gondolier-style then turned into a narrow waterway which took them to another small quay. As soon as Martin had secured his craft he picked Jenni up in his arms and carried her ashore. She protested feebly:

"I can walk, Martin. Really I can. I'm not hurt."

"You don't have to walk," he answered crisply as he pushed open a door with his shoulder, to go along a narrow passageway redolent of smells of cheese and savoury cooking and vegetables. A fat, bald little man in a white jacket came out to stare at them. Martin spoke to him in rapid Italian and he clicked his tongue against his teeth sympathetically.

"Ah, the poor signorina!" he said then in English. "So unfortunate. But people are always falling into the canals. It is a habit our visitors have. No harm done at all. Off with your *vestito* immediately. Elissa shall dry and press it for you and we shall find you clothes to wear while she does so."

"That's Guido Carra," Martin explained as he proceeded along the corridor. "One of the best. Here we are." He

opened the door of a small room. "This is where I'm living," he added. "You get out of these wet things and I'll lend you a dressing-gown until Elissa has fixed you up. You'll be all right now, darling, so don't start fretting. I'm in charge."

Suddenly it seemed right to leave everything to this practical, masterful man. Even the awful problem of facing Mr. Erik receded into the background for the moment. She laid her head against Martin's shoulder before he set her down.

"Three minutes and I'll be back," he said. "Shower through there and here's my best blue robe to put on."

Quickly Jenni stripped and stood gratefully under the hot rushing water, drying herself on the rough brown towel, her face cleansed of all her make-up glowing faintly pink, her rich hair twisted damply on her head. She put on Martin's dressing-gown and looked at *Venetian Dusk* again. It was ruined beyond all hope, no doubt of that. She shivered inside her gown, soft and warm and luxurious. Martin was evidently very extravagant about his personal things she thought in passing. The little room was obviously cheap by contrast. Apart from the divan bed and the single chest of drawers, it held nothing of solid furniture. Jenni shook her head and felt somehow this contradiction only made Martin seem the more endearing.

As soon as she opened the door, the two men came in. Guido laid down a pile of clothing and whisked up her sodden dress with loud exclamations, rushing out with it again.

"If they'll be kind enough to dry it off for me, I can put it on again and get back to the Zucci," Jenni declared. "I ought to telephone or something too. Miss Tozi will be worried to death, wondering whatever has happened to me."

"She knows," Martin said calmly. "I rang the Cypriani and spoke to the assistant manager just now while you were

changing. I didn't go into any details. I don't know the story anyway. So I just said Miss Jenni had met with an accident on the way to the banquet so she wouldn't be appearing and would he let the proper people know. Then I hung up discreetly."

"Thank you, Martin. That was marvellous. But how did you happen to be outside the palazzo in the first place?"

"Hanging about to see you leave," he said. "When I couldn't find you in the party I thought you must have changed your plans and gone to the Cypriani separately. Then I heard your voice somewhere in the distance and I could hardly believe my own ears."

"You're a wonderful person, Martin. You really are."

Guido reappeared, carrying a tray with cups and a tin pot and an unmistakable squat bottle this time.

"To keep out the chills," he explained as he added a generous dollop of brandy to the coffee he poured. Jenni grimaced a little as she drank.

"Ugh! This is strong. But thank you all the same. I'm sure I shall be all right now. Models have to be very tough."

"You do not look so tough to me," Guido remarked as he studied her appreciatively.

"But I am," Jenni asserted. "You should have seen me showing chiffons and summer silks last December. Standing out on a garden terrace to be photographed for the spring issue of a magazine. They had to sweep the snow away before we could pose!"

"It's a crazy kind of life," Martin declared. "The sooner you give it up the better, darling. I hope you aren't too upset about missing this banquet."

"I'm worried about the consequences," Jenni owned. "It's defaulting on duty, you see. And I'm missing my dinner, too."

Guido exclaimed loudly :

"I am thoughtless, Signorina Jenni. You will be hungry and thirsty still. I shall go and bring some food to you at once and a bottle of wine."

"No," Martin said. "I'll take Jenni down to the restaurant. It'll amuse her to eat with the other guests. Keep her from dwelling on things."

"All right," Jenni agreed. "Just leave me for a few minutes while I dress for dinner. I expect I can organise something reasonably decent."

Half an hour later Jenni sat at a red-topped wooden table in the big noisy restaurant on the first floor of the hotel, eating spaghetti with meat balls and tomatoes and drinking cheap red wine. She was wearing a skirt of a shrieking tartan entirely unknown to Scotland, kept up with a leather belt, and a bright pink cotton sweater that would slip down on one shoulder. "Mr. Erik would collapse if he saw me now!" she laughed to Martin. She was still enjoying herself, probably because he was sitting opposite to her and nobody stared anyway since practically everybody else in the crowded room was unconventionally attired too.

Guido Carra's was popular with students and there were dozens of them of all nationalities, in gaily-patterned shirts and jeans and peaked caps as a rule. There were tourists also, several too-fat ladies in over-tight nylon frocks and one elderly Frenchman in a purple velvet smoking jacket and beret. Waiters bustled about cheerfully, stopping to exchange jokes in passing, some of them singing the refrain as a Danish boy switched on the little transistor radio he had laid on the table and the sounds of a dance band came into the room.

Martin put out a hand to touch Jenni's for a moment.

"You don't know how adorable you look," he said softly. "So pink and sweet and utterly natural. I like you so much better this way than when you're tricked out in those exaggerated outfits."

Jenni giggled. "And when I put on *Venetian Dusk* to-night I was wishing you could see me in it!"

"Well, so I did!"

"Hardly as I intended, Martin. It's odd you should object to my professional clothes though. Men usually want to see a model girl looking glamorous."

"They probably don't regard you as I do," Martin explained. "You're the girl I intend to marry so I prefer to see you looking as you will do in our home."

"Isn't your wife allowed to wear pretty dresses and use make-up then? Surely you don't want her eternally in a kitchen apron beside the sink!"

"Don't choose to misunderstand me, Jenni darling," he replied. "You'll look pretty and I'll give you nice dresses I promise. What I mean is that I detest these sensational clothes you wear at the shows and standing about in absurd poses for the camera-men. I loathe the way the men stare at you then, too."

"Hopelessly old-fashioned, aren't you?" Jenni teased.

"I expect I am," he admitted, "where loving you is concerned at least."

She smiled at him affectionately, thinking happily how solid and comfortable he was, his broad shoulders prepared to carry all her troubles without any fuss. Martin smiled back then asked directly:

"How did you come to get locked in tonight, Jenni? You haven't told me the story yet."

Jenni hitched up her sweater, feeling an edited version would be the best part of valour now. Martin couldn't be expected to understand all the machinations. He had no idea of a woman like Carlotta and what she was capable of nor would he appreciate the predicament in which Mario had placed them both.

"It was the Duchesa di Falissimo," she began to explain carefully. "Count Tolani's sister. She objected to the idea

of my appearing in their family jewels from the start. It wasn't fitting I should show them in public and so forth. I thought she'd changed her mind tonight but she tricked me into leaving the others then locked me into that room. As she was going off she called through the door that she'd let me out when she got home again."

Martin considered her for a moment.

"So that's the basic outline," he remarked, "but you haven't told me the whole truth, of course, have you?"

Jenni went pinker still.

"It is true, Martin," she protested. "Surely you don't think I'd lie to you. Or do you?"

"No, but you're holding something back. Where are the jewels now, by the way? You aren't wearing any I can see."

Jenni's hands instinctively flew to her throat.

"No! I took them off in your room when I was changing out of *Venetian Dusk*. I remember putting them down on the chest of drawers just before I went under the shower." She began to push her chair back. "I'd better go and get them right away."

"Sit down—they'll be quite safe," Martin said, "the room's locked and I have the only key. Nobody can get in. Do you want to wear them again or something? No? Then suppose I drop them in at the Palazzo Tolani first thing in the morning on my way to work."

"Oh, Martin, would you do that? I'd be terribly grateful. That really would save me lots of embarrassment."

"As good as done, my sweet. Now relax and forget about the blessed diamonds and everything else except us."

They finished their meal then Jenni leaned back to say:

"I expect Carlotta will get the shock of her life when she finds I've escaped from that room. She'll be wondering just what I'm going to say and do in the morning. Not that I know myself yet. I'm terribly tired and drowsy. It must be all this stuff, you've made me drink."

"Do you good, darling. Keep the chill out. Perhaps you had better be getting back to the Zucci now though. Unless you'd prefer to stay here for the night?"

"No-o, I must go back. Sophia and Miss Tozi will be going mad already I expect. I don't want to upset them too much because it wasn't their fault anyway."

"Come along then," Martin said rising. "I can see your eyelids are drooping. I'll walk you round the corner. It's no use mulling over things now. They'll seem clearer in the morning when you've had some sleep."

Cautiously Jenni tested her belt, hitched up her sweater once more and allowed herself to be led out of the restaurant. She said 'goodbye' to Guido and thanked him as he promised to send her dress round to the Zucci in the morning. Then Martin took possession of her arm and together they went out of the front door. There they halted abruptly. Some young people were sitting out on the steps, one of them a thin teenage boy strumming a mandolin and singing. The song was plaintive, almost hungry, calling mournfully for lost love. The lamps shone dimly in the narrow street and the reflected light made the singer's face seem all the more white and haggard.

The tone of the boy's voice was so exquisitely poignant it tore at the heart-strings. Jenni felt tears pricking her eyes as she stood there close to Martin. His arm tightened abruptly and instinctively. Drawing her back into the shadowed doorway he kissed her gently and spontaneously. It was the simplest and most natural kiss in the world and as Jenni felt his lips on hers she knew it was. Awareness began to flow over her, the realisation Martin must be her man, that she responded to him automatically and gladly. She did not pause to analyse all these emotions now. She was content to accept them in their wonderful newness, resting her head against his shoulder as his arm circled her waist.

Slowly they drew apart at last and went down the steps past the singer, who was silent now, and along the street. They walked over the little bridge which spanned the canal and turned into the square in which the Hotel Zucci stood. Two more lovers who had fallen under the magic spell of the old Venetian moon. Outside the Zucci they kissed once again.

"Good night, my love. I shall see you tomorrow."

"Yes, tomorrow," Jenni echoed. "Good night, Martin . . . Good night."

The porter opened the door for her with his usual bow and flashing smile though she saw the expression in his eyes as they rested on her strange attire. The foyer was practically deserted and nobody spoke to Jenni as she went upstairs. In the empty bedroom she peeled off Elissa's clothes and tumbled into bed, even forgetting her beauty routine and her hair care. The moment her head touched the pillow she fell asleep.

Hours later she became dimly aware somebody was pulling at her shoulders and shouting in her ear. Reluctantly she opened her eyes and saw it was Sophia, blonde hair dishevelled, wearing her velvet housecoat.

"Lo, dear," Jenni murmured sleepily. "Good party? It isn't morning yet, is it?"

"It's after seven o'clock—wake up at once!" Sophia cried. "Let the shutters go, Gina. Perhaps the direct light will rouse her."

Jenni sat up blinking as the sunshine poured in on her through the window.

"Oh, goodness!" she said. "It is morning then."

"What on earth happened to you last night? Where were you all those hours and hours? We've been absolutely mad. Nobody knew anything about you. Nobody could trace you after you left the Palazzo Tolani last night. Gina, run and bring Miss Tozi here at once, please—She was going to the

police to report you as missing and I was going to telephone London and tell Mr. Erik. I could slap you, Jennifer Wells. I really could!"

Jenni smiled at her cheerfully, refreshed and bright again now.

"You needn't get so excited, Sophia dear," she declared. "A message was sent to the Cypriani to say I shouldn't be there because I'd had an accident."

"Yes, a telephone call from nowhere that couldn't be traced. No details given either! Nobody but nobody could find you last night. We thought you must have been taken ill or something so Tozi called the hotel but you weren't here. And you still weren't in this room at one o'clock, because I came in myself then."

"Please don't scream at me so," Jenni begged. "I'm sorry you're worked up, of course, but it's not necessary, you know. I must have come in just after you. If you'd slept here last night, you'd have found me."

"I got my things and went along to Carol and Jane's room," Sophia said. "I couldn't have rested here alone in the circumstances. But where did you vanish to and what exactly happened to you?"

"Yes. That is what I also require to know, Miss Jenni," announced Miss Tozi as she rushed in, a dynamic little blue-headed whirlwind. Behind her came half a dozen of the models, in various stages of night attire and semi-dress, all peering eagerly into the room. Jenni waved to them, laughing.

"Goodness, I'm quite a public spectacle!" she remarked. "How nice of you all to be so concerned."

"It is not a fun matter," Miss Tozi snapped. "Out! Out!" She shooed the girls back into the corridor as though they were a flock of birds, then she closed the room door and turned the key, going over to stand beside Jenni's bed.

"Now," she commanded, motioning Sophia to sit down

on her own bed, "I control myself with the greatest difficulty, Miss Jenni. How can you smile after the way you made us all suffer last night. Tell us immediately and in the fullest detail the reason you did not attend at the banquet as you should have done. We are waiting."

Jenni took a deep breath and obeyed.

"It's an amazing story really," she began but she left nothing out of her recital. "Signora Carra very kindly lent me some things to wear while my dress was dried," she indicated the tartan skirt and the sweater lying on the carpet near the window. "It wasn't ready when I left the place so she promised to send it round today. I'm afraid it's completely ruined though. I only hope Mr. Erik will sue the Duchesa for its price at least. She's really responsible for the damage to it after all."

Then she folded her hands, waiting for the explosion. She was rather surprised when none came. Sophia appeared to have been struck dumb with astonishment while Miss Tozi's wrinkled brown face was merely very thoughtful.

"So," she pronounced. "And what about the jewels, Miss Jenni. The Tolani diamonds."

"I took them off at Carra's in Martin's room. He's looking after them. He's going to deliver them back to Count Tolani on his way to work this morning, so that's all right."

"All right!" Sophia flung up her red-tipped hands dramatically. "It's terrible. Far worse than I ever thought. Just think what the newspapers will do with a story like this. The appalling publicity for The House of Donne!"

"There need be no publicity if the matter is handled with discretion," Miss Tozi said unexpectedly. "You will not repeat what Miss Jenni has told us, of course, Miss Sophia. Nor must Miss Jenni discuss it with people either."

"But how are we going to explain?" Sophia demanded. "All the girls are agog to begin with. The committee will be enquiring, too, won't they?"

"Then we shall say Miss Jenni was suddenly taken ill last night. Just as she was leaving the Palazzo Tolani. She was the last of the party, alone in her gondola since the launch had already gone. The gondolier took her back to the palazzo where she rested until she felt stronger. Then she attempted to return here but on the way the faintness overcame her again so she was taken into Carra's to recover."

"But you telephoned to the palazzo, Miss Tozi," Sophia frowned. "They assured you she wasn't there."

"Ah, yes. Then it was the most unfortunate misunderstanding. The steward who answered the telephone was unaware Miss Jenni had been brought back again. That makes sense. Count Tolani and the Duc and Duchesa are not likely to contradict us."

"And what am I supposed to have suffered from?" Jenni asked.

"The heat, I think. It is not unreasonable that anybody unaccustomed to our Venetian climate should feel its effects."

"It sounds rather thin," Sophia frowned. "Do you think people will believe us?"

"If you speak with conviction—but yes," Miss Tozi rejoined tartly. "Now perhaps you will go and tell the story to the other girls who are all waiting so anxiously to hear. I will remain with Miss Jenni for a time. I wish to speak privately with her."

Sophia went out, obviously disapproving of the whole affair but determined to uphold the prestige of The House of Donne.

"I'm afraid I've thoroughly upset her," Jenni said. "I am sorry because she has always been most kind and helpful to me. I was quite green when I took up modelling and Sophia showed me all the things I needed to know."

"You are the novice, yes," Miss Tozi agreed, "it is evi-

dent from the way you behave. A child could not be more lacking in experience. Not to understand a woman like Carlotta di Falissimo. Have you never met with jealousy before in your life then?"

"Jealous of Mario—Count Tolani, you mean? But she's his sister, Miss Tozi."

"And does not wish him to have love affairs in case he should decide to marry which would put her nose out of joint. He admires you as we can all see and that has frightened her. It was a tribute to your beauty when he wished you to wear his jewels, of course. The Tolanis are strange people, Miss Jenni."

"It was certainly a spiteful trick to play on me," the girl declared. "I wonder what Mario will say to her when he knows what she did."

"There is a peculiar history to the family," Miss Tozi said. "The old Contessa remains locked up in her apartments now because her mind has gone completely. Her husband committed suicide and Carlotta herself has always been subject to violent storms of passion."

She smiled at Jenni then, her dark eyes twinkling.

"And how unhappy Tolani was last night," she continued, "so worried about you, and yet he could not leave his guests to enquire. I feel he must be quite infatuated with you."

"Ye-es. Perhaps he is. I suppose he'll be ringing up any minute now to find out what happened."

"Strange he has not already done so," Miss Tozi remarked. "Probably he is conversing with your lover, the Englishman. To learn of him will undoubtedly be a shock to the Count."

"Oh, but Martin isn't my lover in that sense," Jenni explained hastily. "I mean, he does love me but—"

"You love him in return," Miss Tozi said. "I can see it for myself. You are too young to hide the fact. It

shows in your voice when you speak of him and in your eyes."

"Does it? Oh, dear!"

"Why sigh, Miss Jenni? You hesitate to accept him because he is poor maybe and has no prospects? When I first saw you with him I was told by Miss Sophia he is a glass-maker whom you have met quite casually since you came to Venice?"

"Well, we actually met in the aircraft coming out."

"You have seen his passport one assumes. And confirmed his background in England?" As Jenni shook her head, she added slowly with emphasis, "Then do you think you were wise to entrust him with jewels worth millions of lire? How can you be sure he will deliver them back to Count Tolani? It would be a great temptation to many men without fortune to hold such valuable diamonds in their hands."

Jenni gasped in horror.

"But of course Martin will give them back, Miss Tozi. You don't know him."

"Neither do you," the little woman pointed out. "We shall have to wait and see if he is indeed honest. In the meantime for your private ear—Miss Arni has been telling Count Tolani and also the Duchesa about Signor Martin. She has shown them the photograph which she took of you together at the Lido one day. You appear in the affectionate pose, I understand."

"She would," Jenni exclaimed angrily. "It's a perfectly harmless picture, I assure you. Martin was only helping me up the steps from the beach no matter what that wretched Arni says. She's been deliberately vile to me ever since I got to Venice."

"More jealousy perhaps," Miss Tozi smiled dryly. "Count Tolani paid her much attention when he visited Stockholm I am told. Now an Italian girl would have pulled her hair and tried to scratch her face long before this."

"I don't think I'll do that," Jenni remarked, "irritating as she is."

"I would not recommend it," Miss Tozi replied, "but if you have decided it is Count Tolani you want and not the Englishman, you will have to fight for him. Arni is trying most deliberately to poison his mind against you."

"Thank you. But I hardly know myself what I want to do at this moment," Jenni confessed. "I can't help thinking about Martin after what you've just said. He couldn't possibly be dishonest though. He couldn't. Martin crooked? Oh, no! Why, one of the nicest things about him is the sense of security he gives you."

"Which would be a valuable attribute for a thief," Miss Tozi observed. "But time will tell us." She rose firmly. "Now this matter of last night has been settled, we shall say no more about it. You will not get up before lunch, Miss Jenni. Remember you are recovering from fainting attacks. Then this afternoon you can go and keep your appointment at the hairdresser's and in the beauty salon. By this evening you will be quite strong again, able to go to the masked ball as if nothing had happened. You understand?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Tozi. I'm glad you've taken it so nicely. You're awfully sweet to me always. But I'm positive there's nothing wrong with Martin. He is straight. I'm sure he is."

"How you love him!" the little woman said. "Though Count Tolani would undoubtedly make you a better partner. He is rich as well as handsome."

"Would he?" Jenni asked herself aloud as the door closed. She could not fix her thoughts on Mario now, though it did occur to her she might ring him up at the palazzo to tell him she was all right. Pushing the idea aside, she thought about Martin exclusively, nervously yet still blissfully. It had been such a golden moment last night as

they listened to the singer on the steps. She had never imagined she would ever respond to a man so instinctively as she had done to Martin nor find the touch of his mouth so supremely sweet, rousing undreamed-of emotions in her body and her heart. She tingled again now at the recollection of it. Then her ruminations were sharply dispersed as Sophia returned, followed by Carol and Gabrielle and Janine all full of chatter and solicitude for her illness.

It was not until three o'clock in the afternoon that Jenni found the opportunity for private conversation with Sophia. They were going along with the other models to have their hair and their faces prepared for the evening, Jenni fresh in pale green linen and Sophia in a sheer white dress. Just before they left their room *Venetian Dusk* had been delivered by a Carra maid. Jenni was bewailing it now.

"What a ruin!" she cried. "That lovely, lovely number. Isn't it abominable? Mr. Erik will be furious and miserable, both together."

"You're due for quite a session in his room on Monday morning, aren't you?"

"Monday! Oh, of course. We fly back tomorrow, don't we?"

"Why so surprised? You know the *bal masque* tonight winds up the Fashion Month."

"The Duchesa will be there, I suppose. And Mario. Those would be his carnations that arrived just now but there wasn't any card with them. Still he must know the truth about last night by this time."

As they turned into the hairdresser's salon, she added: "I wonder what happened this morning when Martin went to give the diamonds back."

"If he did go."

Jenni flushed.

"He certainly did," she asserted, "because he said he was going and I trust Martin."

"You're about the only person who does then," Sophia observed. "Miss Tozi definitely has her doubts—Good afternoon, Varani. You must give me a really dreamy style today because it's your last chance."

"The signorinas return to London now? Ah, how sad for Italy! . . ."

Sitting under the drier, Jenni still fretted and brooded. She was leaving early in the morning and she did not even know how or where to get in touch with Martin after that. Presumably she could write to him at Carra's but he might have left before her letter arrived. She must give him her London address as well and find out exactly where he lived in Lancashire. She needed to see him too before she left Venice but where could they meet? He would be at work at Murano today in the glass factory until six o'clock. Then he had to come back to the city on the steamer by which time she would be ready to start dressing for the ball. She sighed so loudly an assistant hurried up to enquire if the signorina was feeling faint again or desired a magazine to read while her hair dried.

There was only one thing which seemed possible. Jenni did it. It was essential she saw Martin again soon, first to assure herself the Tolani diamonds had indeed been restored to their owner then to discuss their own tenderly intimate affairs. At seven o'clock as she stood with Sophia in their room, she announced clearly and firmly:

"I'm going out for half an hour before I change. I want to see Martin. It's most important."

Sophia was folding lingerie into a suitcase. She held up an apricot satin slip as though she had never seen it before. Her eyes fixed on the delicate fabric, she asked coldly:

"Do you think that's really sensible in the circumstances, Jenni?"

"I daresay it isn't but it's something I must do. I shan't be very long."

Picking up her bag, she ran out of the room before Sophia could pass any further comment. It only took a few minutes to hurry across the square and over the bridge and down the narrow street to Carra's. As usual the hotel looked shabby and half-deserted outside but when Jenni went into the hall she found a gay crowd of people drinking and chattering and playing cards and exploding with sudden bursts of laughter like their campair-sodas. There was a portly waiter scuttling round but he only shook his head apologetically when Jenni addressed him in English.

She looked for the desk but it was nowhere to be seen. Then an English voice fell on her ears.

"You want Guido or something?" it asked. "He's gone out. Won't be back for an hour or more yet."

He was a tall young man with a crew cut and a lean, sun-bronzed face above his cotton singlet and tapered check pants. He surveyed Jenni with interest.

"Perhaps I can help you," he suggested. "Be a pleasure."

"Actually I want to find Mr. Martin Heywood. He's an Englishman who's staying here. Do you think he's in?"

"I'm sure he isn't," the young man laughed. "That's the boy the *carabinieri* came and took away early this morning. Martin Heywood from somewhere in Lancashire."

"The *carabinieri*. They're the police!"

"That's right. The cops in person. You find them everywhere these days."

"But what for?" Jenni demanded. "Whatever had Martin done?"

"Search me. They collected him soon after dawn. Woke up the whole place. Guido did his nob too. He likes to keep on the right side of the law. Heywood didn't want to go along either. He even tried to clump one of them on the nose. Quite a giggle it was to watch."

CHAPTER NINE

JENNI WAS NEVER very clear what happened at the masked ball in the stately Hall of the Doges that night. At first she had flatly refused to go. She had returned to the Zucci with her eyes brimming with tears which spilled over as soon as she got indoors. Sophia took one look at her as she came into the room and observed :

"So they have arrested Heywood ! Arni was talking about it just now, but I didn't know if it was true or not."

"There must be some mistake," Jenni wailed. "Martin couldn't have tried to steal the diamonds. He couldn't. I won't believe it."

"Is he charged with theft then?"

"I don't know."

"Could be some other charge hanging over him," Sophia pointed out. "The police wouldn't have carted him off to gaol unless they had some definite cause. You'd better ask Tozi for the details when you get to the ball tonight. Or Tolani if you prefer."

"But I thought Martin was so honest and reliable," Jenni sobbed. "It's incredible he should do a thing like this."

"We don't really know what he has done yet," Sophia said, "though I should think myself it probably is the diamonds. The way you handed him a fortune so casually leaves me speechless."

"I suppose I am to blame," Jenni admitted. She looked

at the green brocade dress which Gina had laid out, with the gay little tricorné hat and the veil and the black lace fan. "I can't possibly go to the ball," she added. "I must go round to the police station right away. Find out what's happened and why they're keeping Martin there."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Sophia announced, her blue eyes flashing. "We've had more than enough trouble already. If you're missing again tonight, there'll be the worst kind of scandal. Tozi wouldn't be able to clear it up for you so neatly a second time, either. You'll put on that costume and come to the ball with the rest of us."

"I won't," Jenni declared. "How can I, Sophia? I have to know what Martin has done."

"You can find out discreetly at the ball," Sophia told her. "It's probably something you should keep right out of anyway. You don't know what he's been doing when he hasn't been with you, do you now?"

"No-o. But just the same, I feel I ought—"

"I think you're forgetting why you came to Venice, Jenni. So I'll remind you that you're being paid to model here for The House of Donne. You do owe some loyalty to Mr. Erik, who's entrusted you with the job. It won't be even commonly decent to cause a lot of unpleasant talk now. Reflects on British prestige because after all, you and I are the representatives of our country here."

Jenni quivered sharply. Less determinedly she replied:

"You're right, Sophia. I agree you are. But don't you see—"

"No, I don't. You can't allow your private life to interfere with your professional claims. No model ever can."

She sat down at the dressing-table, banding back her honey-coloured hair preparatory to making-up.

"Be your age, Jenni," she said over her shoulder. "Think before you act. If you don't show up at the ball with everybody else tonight, it will probably be the end of your

career. Mr. Erik will certainly sack you and no other *haute couture* house would employ you when they heard his reasons either."

"That's very hard," Jenni remarked through white lips.

"If you expected a soft life when you became a model you were a fool," Sophia retorted. "Now go and have your bath and start making yourself presentable. You'll hear all about the Martin Heywood affair tonight, mark my words. Certainly from Tolani. He isn't going to be casual where his heirloom jewels are concerned. Well?" she added as Jenni did not move, "are you going? Or not?"

Jenni stood up then, reluctantly withal.

"You win," she acknowledged. "I'm sorry, Sophia. I'll come to the ball, of course."

Gina helped her to dress and dimly Jenni had to admit the seventeenth century costume was most becoming. Her hair glittered softly under its white powder and the tight-waisted sweeping gown lent charm to her figure even though it was undoubtedly hot to wear. As Gina handed her the little black half-mask, Jenni suddenly thought the fashion world was like this strip of rich velvet decorated with glamorous sparkle; behind the disguise was still the iron hand which could come down so pitilessly without any mercy. Yet Sophia was quite right. If you meant to be successful you had to submit to that.

Jenni felt like an automaton as she walked across the foyer with Sophia to join the other girls assembling there for the evening. Miss Tozi greeted her with a smile. "I am most relieved you have recovered," she said. "We are happy to see you with us once again."

Arni raised her eyebrows as she met Jenni and turned aside to murmur something to one of the German models which made her smile. Everybody else accepted Jenni's return without any particular comment. The heat undoubtedly was a hazard they knew. Several of them moaned

openly about sore feet and swollen ankles and the difficulty of keeping one's face properly cool-looking. They all trooped out to the launch talking gaily however. A model never revealed her private problems to the public eye.

Jenni sat quietly in the bows beside Sophia, dreamily watching the city slide past, wondering how its ancient walls and vine-draped terraces and slender spires could look so enchanting when she was utterly miserable herself. Not that she permitted it to show. She had achieved her professional poise with a great effort and she was clinging to it firmly. She swept into the Hall of the Doges with her head up and a gracious smile on her face, ready to play her full part in the evening's festivities. She knew already they were going to be quite elaborate for Venice was ending its month of glamour and elegance with a superb ball in a majestic setting. When the unmasking had taken place, the models were to ride round the enormous hall in low flower-decked carriages drawn by cream-coloured ponies. Each carriage would fly the flag of the country whose models rode in it. Then there would be speeches and champagne toasts and the distribution of souvenirs before the silver trumpets sounded and the band struck up the Italian National Anthem, indicating Fashion's Venetian gala was over.

"What a brilliant crush," Sophia murmured to Jenni as they ascended the marble steps. "I don't see the Duchesa in the reception committee either."

Mario was there to greet the guests again. He had chosen an elaborate black and gold costume, a scarlet-lined cape flung back from one shoulder, a glittering sword at his waist. Jenni realised this was exactly how the Count Tolani of the day must have looked, equally tall and imperious and vividly fascinating. He came forward to take Sophia's hand politely for a moment before he turned to Jenni.

"I am so glad to see you tonight," he said. "And fully recovered one trusts?"

"Quite, thank you, Count Tolani."

"This heat wave—so unseasonable too. It has even affected my sister the Duchesa. She is prostrate with migraine, unable to join us alas!"

"Most unfortunate," Sophia remarked, beginning to move on. As Jenni was about to follow her, Mario whispered for her ear alone: "I cannot talk now, beloved, but later on I will seek you out to dance."

Then he had to greet the next arrivals in line while Jenni went into the main body of the hall.

"I fancy Carlotta has got the worst of the encounter," Sophia murmured a few moments later. "They do say Tolani can be relentless when he chooses. Undoubtedly you've been revenged, Jenni!"

"Probably. But I still don't know what's happened to Martin. I think I'll go and ask Miss Tozi if she has any news yet."

"Well, don't get into mischief," Sophia warned quickly. "You're such an erratic girl."

"We're supposed to mingle, aren't we? And dance with whom we choose until it's time to unmask at midnight."

"Yes. That's all right. But do be out on the terrace at ten minutes past twelve to get ready to take your place in the carriage parade with me."

"I'll be there, Sophia. Don't worry."

They parted then but Jenni did not find it easy to contact the hostess. There were several other little ladies among the crowd, their hair hidden in fancy headwear and all masked, so it was a problem to identify Miss Tozi now. Men kept preventing Jenni from searching too. As soon as she finished dancing with one, another quickly claimed her. Inevitably photographs were being shot and she was required to appear in these. The camera-man had merely donned an old cotton jacket and a tall silk hat as his contribution to the period scene.

So Jenni had to wait, concealing her impatience as well as she could, until at last Mario came for his dance.

"I have most carefully remembered your costume," he smiled as he led her out. He had chosen a slow waltz so it was not too hard for Jenni quickly to ask him the question uppermost in her mind.

"Mario—did you get the diamonds back safely this morning?"

"But certainly. They are now in the vault at the Banco di Venezia once again. If only I could have seen you wearing them at the banquet last night. It will be a long time before I forgive Carlotta for denying me that pleasure."

"You know exactly what she did to me, don't you? Locking me up in that room."

"But I did not know until this afternoon when Miss Tozi called on me," he said. "However can I express my sadness to you, Jenni? That you should have been treated in such a manner and under my own roof too."

"I thought I might have heard from you today," Jenni remarked. "A phone call perhaps."

"It would not have been wise to discuss this delicate matter on the telephone," he declared. "I felt you would understand the situation and be generous."

"Oh, I don't attach any blame to you," Jenni assured him. "What did you think had happened when I failed to appear last night?"

"I had no idea. It was most worrying, a mystery in every way. Carlotta told me she had seen you leaving my house in a gondola just after her own party. It seemed that somewhere along the canal you had vanished into thin air. Then came that peculiar telephone message nobody could understand. I began to think you must have been kidnapped, so at eleven I sent for the Chief of Police."

Startled, Jenni missed a step and laughingly Mario drew her close, holding her still for a moment to recover.

"Albero is an old friend of mine," he resumed as they started to dance again, "trustworthy and most discreet. Naturally I wanted to trace you as quickly as possible and with the minimum of publicity. Imagine to yourself," he rolled his eyes, "Jenni is not at my house so I am told and she is not at the Zucci. Where can she be? As we puzzle, Arni came in suggesting you had run away with your English lover. She was not aware you were wearing my jewels, but still—already she had told me you met him secretly . . ." He paused, smiling apologetically.

"And so you thought I'd absconded?" Jenni gasped, missing another step then. "Mario! How could you?"

"I think we had better leave the floor," he said. "We shall be colliding with other people soon. Let us go and admire the pictures in the Painted Gallery. It is easier to talk there."

Jenni followed him between the ornate pillars into the long room where the dark walls were hung with paintings of madonnas and saints and long-dead Venetian nobles. Masses of scented lilies had been arranged beneath them and the perfume came warmly to Jenni as Mario took her arm to stroll along.

"I never thought for one moment you had stolen my jewels," he said to her tenderly, "but I was not sure about Heywood. After all, as Albero stressed, a glass-maker does not receive exorbitant wages. I thought perhaps Heywood had played upon your innocent trust to spirit you away somewhere and steal the jewels from you. So I handed his photograph to Albero, who quickly found him at Carra's pensione. He was asleep in bed with the diamonds actually on his person. So of course he was immediately arrested and taken to Albero's headquarters."

"But he was going to bring them back to you this morning," Jenni cried, "to save me embarrassment—I left them with him."

"He did not say how they came to be in his possession," Mario remarked. "He remained quite silent."

"Well, I'll tell you," Jenni interrupted, and did so. Mario listened closely, staring ostentatiously up at the nearest picture only when a group of other elaborately-dressed guests walked past them.

"So!" he observed when Jenni's quick voice stopped. "I did not comprehend all this before."

"Where is Martin now?" Jenni wanted to know. "He's not in prison, is he? If he is, you must get him out at once because I—"

"He is free," Mario said quietly. "He was released two hours ago after I had talked with Miss Tozi and heard something of the story. I had my jewels back and I did not wish a lot of damaging scandal to be bruited around so I decided not to make any charge. Albero sympathetically agreed with me it had all been an obvious misunderstanding."

"That word again!" Jenni said. "And what did Martin say then?"

"Say? But nothing. He paid for the damage he had done to the clothes of one of the *carabinieri* who arrested him. There was a fight at Carra's, you understand. Then he went away."

"Thank goodness!" Jenni sighed in sheer relief. "I've been imagining all kinds of horrors this evening."

Her spirits began to rise. Martin was honest and utterly trustworthy, just as she had always believed. She would go round to Carra's as soon as she left the ball and find Martin there—no matter how late it was either! Everything could be explained at last. She would tell him she loved him too because now she knew clearly beyond any doubt that she did. Together they could smooth out the path immediately ahead of them, the one they would tread together. She smiled radiantly at Mario and thanked him for his tact.

"It was a vile thing which Carlotta did," he said. "She was jealous, of your loveliness and my adoration of you. Her temperament is wild at times and she thought she must humble you to satisfy her malicious tastes. But I am going to atone to you, my enchanting Jenni."

"It's all over," Jenni said. "Just let's close the book and forget it now, Mario, please."

"I shall never forget," he replied. "My honour was smirched and that is something I do not forgive."

"But Carlotta is your sister."

"Which makes it a thousand times worse," he said, "to disgrace our family traditions in such a contemptible manner. Though jealousy is always a monster with an evil sting in the tail. And I am exceedingly jealous at this moment, Jenni. Why did you choose this Englishman for your secret lover and hide the fact from me so carefully?"

If Jenni had not been wearing a mask he would have seen her eyes flash.

"I did nothing of the kind," she denied. "I suppose this is a bit more of the uncharitable gossip Miss Arni's been dishing out? Yes, Martin Heywood and I have seen each other from time to time. Why not? But it isn't the nasty kind of association Arni would like everybody to believe."

"A casual friendliness only," Mario said. "Ah, that is what I thought myself. How could a girl like you be interested in a workman from the glass factory? It would not make sense. So I need not be jealous of Heywood after all."

His hand tightened on her arm, hurting her soft flesh.

"Though I hate to think of any other man even being near you," he said in a low urgent voice, "I'm longing to take you into my arms again, Jenni. I want to kiss your lovely mouth and hear you promise you'll soon be mine. I've been cursing all the demands of the Fashion Month that have kept me away from you when I longed to be at

your side more than anything else in the world. Tomorrow you go back to London I know but I shall follow. Then at last you will give me my heart's desire—"

He broke off sharply, moving a little further apart as three white-wigged ladies with an attendant cavalier came into the gallery.

"Let us go out round the columns on to the terrace, Jenni," he said. "We could be alone there for a few minutes before we are required for the unmasking. Even that brief time with you is better than nothing."

"Yes, let's go," Jenni agreed. "I should like to have a little talk with you, Mario. There's a lot I want to say before I leave Venice."

She would tell him now she loved Martin, no matter how he earned his living, and make it abundantly clear there was no place in her heart for Mario Tolani. It had taken her some time to reach this self-knowledge but now she gloried quietly in it. Mario was fascinating and delightful and she had almost fallen under his spell, encouraged by the romantic Venetian atmosphere and everything it meant. As they came out on to the stone-flagged terrace, Jenni looked across the canal beyond the balustrade and saw the moon was rising. But she knew it held no magic for her unless Martin was the man at her side. Its silver beam was powerless to turn her towards the Italian aristocrat with all the warm instinctive response a woman could so proudly give when her heart dictated.

Green skirts rustling as he moved, Jenni looked up at Mario but before she could utter a word, he had caught her fiercely to him and was pressing his lips hotly on hers.

"I burn for you all the time, Jenni," he told her. "How long can I support this intolerable fire? Carlotta was right when she said I had lost my wits about you and behaved like a love-swept captive. I shall come to London . . ."

Jenni tried to move within the hard circle of his arms but it was impossible.

"No, Mario, please don't make love to me," she begged. "There are things I must say to you now."

"But we can only snatch a few brief minutes, my enchantress. So why should we waste them in talk? Let me kiss your throat and your chin and that sweet little mouth—ah, it is so tempting, so seductive, so tender to mine . . ."

When Mario released her at last Jenni became aware a man was standing a few feet away, watching them from behind a dark brown mask which completed his monk's habit. The cowl covered his head but she still recognised him instinctively.

"Martin! Oh, Martin! It is you, isn't it?"

"Who else?" the monk snapped curtly. "It's taken me a long time to find you tonight but it's certainly worth the effort. Now I can see for myself what a fool I've been."

"Heywood!" Mario exclaimed in angry surprise. "How did you gain admission here?"

"I bought a ticket," Martin told him before his gaze returned to Jenni. "So this is the way of it," he continued in that hard chill tone. "I see now why you wouldn't commit yourself. Why you kept heading me off all the time. Of course you had other fish to fry, hadn't you? Telling me you only went about with this over-stuffed fashion boss for professional reasons. I even believed you, too. You must have laughed behind your hand."

"No, Martin! Don't say such things. You don't understand—"

"Oh, I do now," he said. "You've made it abundantly clear."

"What are you here for?" Mario demanded. "Are you asking for money, Heywood? Compensation for your arrest perhaps?"

Martin ignored him as he went on speaking to the girl.

"No wonder you let me stew in that filthy gaol all day. You weren't going to say you'd been with me last night and given me those jewels yourself in case your precious boy friend failed to appreciate the position. It didn't matter what happened to me, did it?"

"I didn't know until this evening—" But then Mario stepped between her and Martin.

"How dare you speak to Miss Jenni like this?" he said. "You are an insolent lout who has no business here at all. If you are trying to blackmail me into paying for your silence about last night's affair, this is neither the time nor the place. You can come to my office in the morning and I will instruct my secretary to write you a cheque."

"Do you suppose I want anything from you?" Martin demanded. "But you're so crazily egotistical I daresay you do."

"I will not listen to your insults, Heywood. I am warning you." Then he ripped out some phrases in Italian and although Jenni could not translate them, their meaning was quite clear. Martin stepped up to him, clenching his hands, hurling some equally pungent language back. Mario seized his arm but Martin shook him off. Their voices raised in anger, the two men began to shout at each other and suddenly Mario's hand flew out to strike Martin in the chest. Taken unawares he reeled and stumbled against the stonework. Jenni screamed.

The sound brought several people out from the gallery on to the terrace, to pause in astonishment at the sight of the quarrel. The photographer appeared, still wearing his tall silk hat, but Jenni was not conscious of him as she stared anxiously at Martin. Now he had recovered his balance again. The hood had fallen back to reveal his face with the brown mask slashed across it. Jenni knew he was beside himself with fury and she felt frightened.

"Oh, Martin! Please be careful!"

He did not seem to hear her as panting a little he squared up to the equally angry Italian.

"You would, would you?" Martin muttered between his teeth. "Perhaps this'll show you. You deserve a lesson."

His fist shot out and caught Mario on the side of the jaw. Mario swayed sideways, falling against the low stonework of the balustrade, slumping down. Then he toppled over it and the next moment there was a great splash as he hit the water. Jenni screamed again but the sound was almost lost in the general confusion and noise. Somebody yelled to a passing launch to go to the rescue while another man ran along the terrace to the landing steps where ropes and a boat hook were kept. There was a quick series of brilliant flashes as the excited photographer let off bulb after bulb in his attempt to capture every detail of the scene and the persons concerned with it; Jenni vaguely felt the light before her eyes as he took a vivid picture of her.

More people came running out to see what was happening, talking and calling and squealing. In the midst of all the confusion Martin came close to Jenni and said to her clearly :

"I ought to toss you in after him, you empty-headed little cheat. But you're not even worth the trouble. Goodbye, Miss Jenni Model. I'm sorry I ever met you."

He turned on his heel and was gone. As Jenni stared in frozen horror, there was a rustle beside her and blue brocade skirts touched hers. Sophia's arm went protectively round her waist.

"Whatever's all this about?" Sophia asked.

She took one comprehensive glance at Martin's departing figure which the photographer was duly recording and then at the landing stage where the dripping Mario was being helped out of the launch which had saved him.

“Heavens, you have torn it this time, my dear,” Sophia said. “Just wait until tomorrow morning. There’ll be pictures all over the newspapers and what they’re going to say about you in Venice . . ! Not even Miss Tozi will be able to get you out of this one I’m afraid.”

CHAPTER TEN

AS SOPHIA REMARKED, it was like a royal departure when she and Jenni left next morning. Even though they were on the early flight, scores of people congregated at the airport to stare as they arrived while photographers and reporters and TV interviewers scuttled and pressed excitedly around. Miss Tozi accompanied the two girls and did all the talking, leaving Jenni to smile vaguely and reply that she had nothing to say herself. She walked with professional poise, feeling she was taking part in a demanding show, but her heart was still throbbing inside. Cool and elegant in a superb tan silk suit, she managed to give an impression of graceful self-control.

Mario had sent his private gondola to carry them from the Hotel Zucci to the landing-point where his big car and chauffeur met them.

"The Count is most wise," Miss Tozi remarked. "This will confound much speculation and let everybody know he still regards you with admiration despite what has happened. Do you wish to see the newspapers?" she added to Jenni. "I can translate them for you."

Jenni leaned forward and took one glance at the page devoted to glaring photographs of the scene on the terrace.

"No, thanks," she shuddered. "These make it look far worse than it really was anyway."

As the car drew up at the airport building, Mario came

forward to greet them, escorted by several broadly-smiling uniformed officials. Half a dozen cameras promptly recorded the way he kissed the girls' hands and gave Sophia an orchid and Jenni a posy of crimson rosebuds. He was immaculately groomed, wearing a pearl-grey suit, and only the faint blue mark on his jaw betrayed the indignity of last night.

"You're all right now?" Jenni asked him in a low tone.

"Yes, of course," he smiled. "An unfortunate experience, but one I shall soon forget. Still, every good Venetian expects to hit the waters of the canal at some time or other during his life. How charming of you to be anxious about my welfare."

"So long as you don't catch a chill."

"I don't think I shall," he said, his eyes telling her far more than his lips were doing as they crossed the tarmac. "I trust you are not leaving Venice with unpleasant memories though?"

"No," Jenni answered. "I've lots of wonderful ones to take back too."

"Naturally," he agreed warmly. "You have been the success of the Month, the most attractive model of them all. I shall tell Erik Donne how outstanding you were when I telephone him later today."

"What are you going to tell him about—about the diamonds and last night's quarrel and all that?" Jenni asked fearfully.

"Leave it to me and don't worry," Mario said. "You are my first concern as always, adorable Jenni. I am desolated to have to part with you today but I shall soon be coming to London to see you again. Immediately I have settled my business with the jersey manufacturers in Milan and put the autumn designs in hand."

Neither of the girls spoke much during the journey home. Sophia went to sleep, observing that their night's rest had

been unusually short, while Jenni stared out of the window at the cotton-wool clouds and thought about Martin. She was rather surprised not to have received another curtain-lecture from Sophia but instead the elder girl had been quietly sympathetic without comment. Just before the plane touched down, Sophia woke and promptly checked over Jenni's hair and make-up.

"Sure to be a lot more reporters and similar bodies waiting for you," she said, and her prophecy proved true. To Jenni's relief, the urbane figure of Adrian Defoe, Mr. Erik's public relations counsel, rose up before her as she went down the gangway. He seized her arm and steered her expertly past the questioning crowd. "Just one little picture then, boys. Smile, Jenni dear. That's it. Now no more," and put her into a big dark green Bentley she recognised as her employer's own.

"Then the driver can't be bribed to say where he's taking you," Adrian explained as he got in beside her. "Off we go, Bob. If anybody tries to follow, just you shake them off. We don't want anybody pestering Jenni this weekend, do we?"

Sophia had been whisked off by taxi direct to her flat.

"No use interviewing me," she had announced gaily. "I saw nothing and I know nothing so I can't say anything helpful, now can I?"

She had kissed Jenni affectionately before they parted, and murmured, "*Au 'voir*, darling. See you Monday morning."

By a carefully-planned roundabout route, Jenni eventually reached the familiar house near Marble Arch. Miss MacFadden received her back characteristically.

"Madame phoned and told me," she announced succinctly. "I read the haggetty-paggetty about you in the paper this morning too. Still it's only to be expected when folks go mingling with foreigners. Now I'll bring you a tray

of tea up in a few minutes. You'll be glad of a hot drink after your journey. There's some letters for you in the hall and mind you don't knock the new paint in your room when you unpack."

Alone at last, curled up in her familiar armchair, Jenni was finally able to relax a little. Martin's bitter parting words were still ringing in her ears. What a fool she had been not to understand her own heart earlier so she could have told him she loved him just as he loved her. If only he had listened to her on the terrace before he fought with Mario. She would have told him the whole truth about the diamond affair and then that wretched scene need never have taken place at all.

But there was still one way she could let Martin know the truth. Without even waiting to unpack, Jenni sat down at her little bureau and began to write a letter. She tore up the first two attempts but suddenly it became easier to explain and open her heart on paper. Impulsively she unlocked her travel bag and took out the amber glass Bambi, setting it on the mantelpiece where she could see it all the time. It seemed to give her fresh inspiration and as she went on writing, a vision of Martin's face rose up before her. Not darkly furious as she had last seen it but suffused with the tenderness of those halcyon hours on the beach and across the modest café tables. When she sealed the letter, she addressed it to him care of Carra's Hotel.

Next morning Miss MacFadden brought Jenni breakfast in bed.

"The bit you eat it's no trouble," as she observed crisply. "You'll be wanting to rest I don't doubt. Here's the *Sunday Mercury* too. They've a grand picture of you on the front page, wearing a handsome fur coat."

Jenni firmly ignored the folded newspaper as she drank her fruit juice and coffee and nibbled a piece of toast. Presently temptation overcame her and she opened the paper

to regard her smiling face and lithe figure in the silver-blue mink wrap. It was one of those taken in Venice, of course. There was a photograph of Mario beside hers and on the other side one of Martin, an excellent studio portrait too. Jenni stared in astonishment. 'Millionaires Fight over a Model in Venice,' said the thick black headlines.

With a growing feeling of numbness, Jenni read quickly on. The scene was graphically described by a gentleman called The All-Seeing Eye who had certainly not been there at the time.

'Throughout the glamorous Fashion Month the beautiful redhead Jenni, one of Erik Donne's top models, had been alternatively seen out with one or the other of the two wealthy bachelors. Competition between them was plainly keen, so keen they came to blows on the waterside terrace of The Hall of the Doges at the masked ball winding up the gala weeks.'

At least there was no mention of the jewels, Jenni thought gratefully. So long as the gossips only concerned themselves with the quarrel it didn't matter so much. She turned back to the paper again and found the *Mercury* had decided to boast.

'Handsome Martin Heywood comes from the North, a thoroughly democratic chap who enjoys rolling up his sleeves occasionally. Which is probably why *The Sunday Clarion* describes him as a workman at the Murano glass factory. He certainly does work there but not for pay. He's studying the latest designs and processes ready to apply them in the great Lancashire glass empire of which he's one of the directors. His father, Colonel Sir Wilfrid Heywood, is chairman of the six million pound enterprise. Maybe the *Clarion* got fogged because Martin bypasses the Venetian luxury hotels to stay at the modest

pensione run by the Carra family. Not everybody knows Guido Carra was a leader of the Italian Resistance movement during the war and saved Sir Wilfrid's life at Anzio. Every winter Guido and his pretty wife Elissa and their children spend a holiday with the Heywoods at their beautiful Elizabethan mansion Bransbury Manor near St. Helen's.'

Jenni let the paper fall off the bed. Her first reaction was to hope Sophia read the *Mercury*. Mr. Erik did. When Jenni nervously presented herself in his richly-carpeted office on Monday morning, he beamed across his handsome desk benignly.

"I have been following your adventures with the closest interest, Jenni," he declared. "You look so desirable when you wear the clothes I create that men come to blows over you, in fact!"

"Yes. I—I'm terribly sorry about *Venetian Dusk*," she said. "It really wasn't my fault—"

"What's one dress?" Erik enquired, waving his beringed little hand. "I am designing many others. And in any case we are sending the Duchesa di Falissimo an account for twice the normal price of the dress. That will teach her not to insult my young ladies in future! Count Tolani has explained the circumstances to me," he added graciously. "There is no blame at all attached to you."

"You're not angry with me then?" Jenni ventured.

"On the contrary," he laughed. "I am delighted with your success in Venice. The American buyers alone have given you the *cachet*. And the story in the *Mercury* yesterday was a first-class piece of publicity. When millionaires fight over a girl, she is undoubtedly fascinating! But then that is natural for a model of The House of Donne."

"Oh, thank you. Mr. Erik. Thank you so much."

He waved his hand again.

"You are now no longer the junior house model," he informed her. "I engaged another girl, Miss Angela, in that capacity. You will begin to show outside the salon as well as in it. You will appear at the Purple Roses Ball next month and I may even send you to Ascot with Anne and Eleanor."

As Jenni walked back to the dressing-room, she knew she ought to be feeling on top of the world this morning. All her dreams of success were starting to come true, her feet on the ladder of fame. This was what she had been longing for and working for ever since she first decided to become a model. Yet she was simply sad and unresponsive, her heart dispirited. It would not rise again until she heard from Martin.

It seemed astonishing how quickly she was absorbed into the busy routine of The House of Donne once more. Inevitably there was a lot of laughter and chatter about her affairs in the models' dressing-room. Jenni was teased about her two admirers, relieved to find the other girls merely regarded the quarrel as great fun and a compliment to her personality. Sophia, too, had given out the edited version of Jenni's adventures. The Tolani diamonds were never mentioned. Everything was gay and light and not to be taken seriously.

"Coo, I wouldn't half like two rich men fighting over me," as Daisy remarked, helping Nani into a brilliantly-printed satin suit. "I wouldn't care which of them won neither! I remember that Count Tolani coming here. A real smasher he is, good enough for the telly."

Ten days after their return from Italy, Jenni and Sophia went out to lunch together, repairing to the little snack bar in Conduit Street highly popular with the neighbourhood fashion models because of its non-fattening salad dishes. As they faced each other across their trays of cold beef with grated carrot and cole slaw, Sophia remarked unexpectedly:

"Of course you didn't know Martin Heywood was so wealthy, did you?"

"No, I didn't. Not that it mattered, anyway."

"Business chief type, in fact. Even in those dungarees. But I don't suppose he's actually a millionaire. Nor Tolani either. Still they're both wealthy enough for comfort plus. But fancy Heywood choosing to stay at Carra's for such quixotic reasons."

"That's exactly like Martin. He's that kind of man. Terribly loyal and sincere."

"You sound as though you're still hankering after him, darling. Are you? All right, you needn't answer. I can see you are. You fell in love with him then?"

"Yes," Jenni said. "And I'm beginning to wonder if I shall ever see him again. He was so furious with me that night on the terrace. He accused me of not telling him the truth about those horrible jewels and letting him stay in prison just to save myself nasty publicity. It made it worse because Mario was kissing me when Martin appeared too."

"That was awkward," Sophia agreed. "Still, not to worry overmuch, Jenni dear. You'll get over it soon, just you see. You've simply oceans of time ahead of you yet. Wait until you've been to New York in September and met all those ravishing men there. You'll forget all about Martin Heywood then."

"I doubt it," Jenni replied but Sophia only smiled indulgently.

"Your first real heart-throb, wasn't he? We all go through that phase at nineteen. I even did myself if it comes to that. One recovers surprisingly quickly though."

"I've written to him," Jenni explained. "Now I'm waiting for the answer. Surely when he gets my letter . . ."

"We'll see," Sophia declared. "By the way, when is Tolani coming over here? He talked about his next visit when he was seeing us off at the airport I remember."

"I don't know," Jenni said, "and frankly I don't much care."

Days slipped by. At night Jenni would hurry back to Miss MacFadden's but there was never any letter with an Italian stamp on the hall table. Nor did Count Tolani appear at The House of Donne that summer. Jenni did not worry about his dereliction. What did hurt was being forced to accept the fact that Martin had only too evidently meant what he said that last night in Venice. Yet she still clung to the hope it was not really goodbye. Other men escorted her out from time to time and more than one of them made the first advances of love. Jenni only answered frankly: "I'm sorry, but there's somebody else, you see." Though as she looked at her golden Bambi late one night, she added to herself sadly: 'Why can't I get Martin out of my mind now? But somehow or other, I can't.'

Fortunately Jenni was kept so continually occupied as summer wore on she had no time left to brood, only to think about showing clothes and posing for photographs and coping with all the model's inseparable problems like aching limbs and burning feet and producing the eternal faint smile. The evening after the first pre-autumn showing for the press kept her in the salon for hours. She had to pose again and again for the cameras in every outfit she had shown. By the time they reached the final picture, all the other models had gone home.

For this Jenni wore a fabulous cabuchon-emerald velvet coat with great balloon sleeves; beneath it a white satin sheath iced with silver embroidery. Thankfully she stepped down from the dais at last, then caught sight of a little woman standing nearby. A tiny brown-faced woman with fuzzy curls a bright rose-pink now to match her taffeta suit.

"Why, Miss Tozi! How nice to see you again. What are you doing in London?"

"I have come to the Italian Fair," the little woman smiled. "Mr. Erik most kindly invited me to the showing today. A dramatic collection but naturally one expects that from a couturier of his reputation."

"Of course. And is Count Tolani here too?"

Miss Tozi seemed embarrassed, avoiding Jenni's eyes.

"No," she replied. "The Count is in Milan. I do not think he will be in London at all this summer. You see, Miss Jenni, he met our new Italian model, Signorina Dessa, at the jersey manufacturers' show. She is very beautiful, a brunette, who has caused a great sensation. So the Count was attracted—I trust this news does not disturb you?"

Jenni shook her head.

"Not at all. It isn't very surprising really either. The Count tends to be fickle, doesn't he?"

"Precisely," Miss Tozi agreed. "He can never remain constant to one woman very long. Always there must be the new face, the new conquest. And how is your Englishman, Mr. Heywood, Miss Jenni? Are you betrothed to him yet?"

"No. I wish I was. But you see—do let's sit down for a minute and I'll tell you."

Presently Miss Tozi was frowning at the girl thoughtfully.

"But since you have received no answer to your letter, it is obvious what you must do. Go to this place where he lives and explain to him there. He will be at home because he left Venice soon after you did."

"I suppose I could do that?" Jenni began slowly.

"Why not?" Miss Tozi demanded. "He is unreasonable and unfair to you then you must make him see good sense. Now the early showings are over, you can surely obtain a little holiday? Then plainly this is the moment for you to go!"

Forty-eight hours later Jenni stepped out of the express from Euston at St. Helen's station. The porter looked at her curiously, tall and slender in her blue leather trench coat, her dark red hair uncovered.

"Bransbury Manor?" he said. "You'd better catch the bus, love. There's a stop at the end of the yard."

The bus took Jenni through undistinguished streets into surprisingly green and pleasant country. One minute she was passing rows of soot-stained red-brick houses, the next there were hedgerows and fields with cattle grazing and the suggestion of woodlands on the hill beyond.

"Bransbury Manor," the conductor called presently.

Jenni alighted to find herself looking at a pair of tall wrought-iron gates. Behind them a drive led up to a beautiful old mansion set in a colourful garden, its black and white timbers gracious in the early evening sun, serene and mellow. She stared at it, wondering nervously what she ought to do next. She had obeyed the urge to go to the place where Martin was without stopping to make any definite plan of campaign. Should she ring the bell at the little lodge beside the gates and enquire whether Martin was at home? Or would it be better to go to that phone box she could see down the road and speak to him first?

As Jenni hesitated, an elderly woman came out of the lodge. She looked at Jenni and the girl said quickly: "This is Bransbury Manor, isn't it?"

"That's right," the woman nodded, glancing at Jenni's travel bag. "Do you want to go up to the house? Happen you've come for the wedding on Saturday."

"The wedding—I didn't know about that."

"Didn't you now? Eee, its going to be a right grand affair and no mistake. Dozens of folks are coming. Young Mr. Heywood says you only get married once so he wants all his friends to help him celebrate."

"Young Mr. Heywood! He's getting married!"

"Aye, and a real nice girl she is too. Comes from over Swabberley way. He hasn't known her so very long. Only about—"

Jenni did not stay to hear the details of Martin's romance. Blindly she murmured something and turned away, beginning to hasten along the road away from the house in the general direction of the town. How idiotic can you get, because this was obviously all her own fault? She should have made proper enquiries before she came rushing up here to Lancashire. Still, at least she had saved herself the supreme humiliation of facing Martin again only to learn he was in love with somebody else now and about to be married.

"Jenni! Jenni!"

It was Martin's voice calling her but she refused to answer it, increasing her pace, her one instinct to run away as quickly as possible. There was a screech of brakes as the big grey car shot to a standstill beside her. Martin jumped out to grasp her arm.

"Jenni!" he said again. "It is you. I knew there couldn't be two girls in the world with such lovely hair. What are you doing here?"

She made herself halt then and turn to face him. Her heart throbbed with exquisite pain as she looked at those so-well-remembered features, at the broad shoulders and the uncompromising grey eyes and the firm mouth she had once kissed so warmly. But she forced herself to appear outwardly calm, as if she was just going to step out into the salon to show some magnificent gown.

"Actually I'm on my way back to London," she replied with her professional half-smile. "I believe there's another train tonight."

"But why did you come?" he pressed. "Was it to see me?"

"You know it was," Jenni said recklessly. "I wanted to

have an answer to my letter—you haven't even bothered to acknowledge it yet."

"I've received no letter from you, Jenni. Did you send it to Venice or here?"

"I addressed it to you care of Carra's," she answered. "I wrote the day I got home. To make the record straight."

"Then I'm sorry I left there before the letter arrived," Martin said. "It's probably sitting on the rack in Guido's office. He wouldn't bother to forward it on to me. No doubt he'll bring it along personally when he and Elissa come to visit us as usual in November. That's the crazy way Guido always does things."

"I see. But it doesn't matter any longer, Martin."

"Why doesn't it? If you took the trouble to come up here from London . . . tell me what you wrote in that letter, Jenni."

Suddenly she decided she would. It was a kind of penance, an atonement for all her foolish uncertainty, bitterly though it hurt her to confess.

"I didn't sacrifice you deliberately at all, Martin. I wasn't very sensible I know but I did think about you and I'd already made up my mind to come round to Carra's and find you after the ball. And I'm not in love with Count Tolani either. I never was. He just fascinated me when I first got to Venice. He was like part of the city's magic atmosphere. The magic of the moon there . . . So now I hope it's clear to you that I did tell you the truth always. Not that you'll be interested any longer. Because you're going to be married on Saturday, aren't you?"

Martin did not speak for a few moments. He went on regarding her and Jenni could see a dark flush staining his cheek beneath the tan. Two men walked past them, nodding to Martin cheerfully.

"Evening, Mr. Heywood. Nice night and all."

"Evening, Ben. Evening, Charley. Yes, it is—Look, Jenni, we can't talk here. Get into the car."

Dumbly, because it didn't seem to matter much, she obeyed. Martin turned the car and drove towards the iron-work gates which opened automatically as they approached, closing again behind them. Instead of proceeding up to the house, Martin swung into a narrow path between the trees. In the privacy of their shade, he stopped.

"Now, Jenni," he said quietly, "you're a bit mixed-up. I'm not getting married. It's my younger brother, Peter. Why were you so anxious to tell me all this, darling?"

Her heart was pulsing excitedly now.

"I was determined you should understand," she replied. "You wouldn't listen to me that night. You said such abominable things."

"I'm sorry, Jenni. I do have the filthiest temper I know. I'm such a short-sighted obstinate brute—and you love me enough to come and show me so, don't you?"

"I haven't said I love you yet," Jenni pointed out. "Because I'm not sure if you still feel the same way you did in Venice. Or whether it was just the moonlight affecting you too."

"I'd been to Venice many times before and the moon never made me fall in love," Martin smiled, his arm going round her, drawing her close to him. "I'm sorry, my darling. I've been thinking about you every day since we parted, wondering how you were and if you ever stopped to remember me. I've even been looking at fashion magazines to find your photograph."

Then he was kissing her, almost enquiringly at first but quickly merging into passion. Jenni lay there against him happy and exultant, almost afraid to move in case it only was a dream that would vanish. She wound her arms round Martin's neck, drawing his head down so that she could kiss him back with equal intensity.

Martin let her go reluctantly.

"Has that convinced you?" he asked. "There's no moon shining now! So tell me you love me, Jenni. Say it . . . Say it again."

"I suppose I shall have to marry you soon," Jenni observed a little later, raising her head from his shoulder for a moment. "And come and live here in Lancashire."

"Of course. You're the only girl I ever wanted for my wife at that. But it means giving up all your fashion modelling, darling. You weren't too certain if you could do that, were you?"

"Not then," Jenni answered, "but I've changed my mind since." She had known for some time past that her love for Martin was starting the falling away of ambition, piece by piece, like petals from a fading flower. "If I gain your love in return, that's all that matters."

It was a long time before she said anything else. At last she uttered a sigh of deepest joy and satisfaction and remarked as she rested contentedly against him:

"Love can be different things to different people, Martin dear. I'd always thought it would strike me out of a blue sky like a flash of lightning and I'd know immediately 'this is the man for me.' It does come that way to some women. But with me love just grew gradually. I didn't even grasp what was happening to me myself at first. But now I do know I love you and I always shall. Love's here to stay and I'm the happiest girl in the world. Let's go to Venice again for our honeymoon, shall we? There's still a lot of the city I haven't seen."

Martin laughed as he tenderly stroked her hair.

"All right," he agreed, "I daresay I can organise it. I shan't mind the Venetian moon shining down on you so long as you're safely married to me!"

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